

November 2010

In Praise of Pachyderms

"Elephants are symbols of might and memory, harmony and patience, power and compassion. We are equivocal about them, as we are about anything, which evokes strong feelings in us. We love and fear them, kill and revere them, see them as beasts of the moon with crescent tusks or as buffoons in baggy pants."

Author unknown

The Mahout was a man of few words, but when he spoke, they ranged from high pitched squawks to low rumbles, and all of them part of a 'conversation' with our small team of elephants as we prepared to enter Kaziranga, a wildlife reserve of India's North East frontier. His relationship with the elephants had started when he was six years old and there was a time-honoured mutual respect, which illustrated for one of the most revered symbiosis between man and beast.

Perched on top of these lumbering Pachyderms was a new experience for me and it took a while to get used to the sways and lurches, particularly with my



camera bag balanced precariously. Moving quietly and steadily through the tall grasses, we were able to approach the rare single horn rhino amongst other wildlife, but most of all was the sense of connection to wildness.



Travel writer and conservationist, Mark Shand described similar feelings in his celebrated account of travelling 1000kms through the East Indian states of Orissa, Bengal and Bihar with Tara, a 30 year old female elephant. Getting to know Tara and delving deep into the history and continuing plight of the Asian elephant gave him a lifelong passion for Pachyderms. Reading this account again not so long ago reminded me of my first, albeit distant encounter with elephants; the enchanting and frightening 'Pachyderm Parade' in the animated, Jungle Book; all bluster and pomp, and highly entertaining.

Elephants have been symbolic in so many countries, faiths and philosophies, we have every reason to be in awe of them. Of all the numerous Hindu Deities, probably the most revered is Ganesh, the God of wisdom and remover of obstacles. It is not possible to travel around India without seeing the elephant headed Deity in one form or another. Crossing the Yamuna river in Delhi one evening, I met a family parading a very large and very pink statue of Ganesh in preparation for national celebrations the following week.

I came across a slightly less traditional interpretation of Ganesh in Rajasthan some weeks later. An artist of some standing had for years been respectfully depicting the Hindu Gods in all their glory for both local needs and the tourist trade. One day he decided to bring Ganesh into the 20th century. After much cajoling, he showed me a series of paintings, one of which had Ganesh sitting on the bonnet of a convertible with his arm around his girlfriend.

Clearly an affront to established Hinduism, but the artist considered it an honour and indeed a duty to bring such an important figure into a world he and his family inhabited. At that time, the exuberant festival of Holi was in full swing. Powders of every hue and colour lined the avenues in cones and tins, and young men were daubed in blues and yellows and careering wildly on their motorbikes in search of others to decorate.

Elephants had acquired their own event as part of the celebrations and were being decorated to within an inch of their lives. Khurram didn't see his Muslim faith as a barrier to taking part in a Hindu festival. His backyard was tucked away behind a maze of alleys and streets stretching out from the gates to the Pink city of Jaipur and I would never have found it without Aziz, my loyal and determined rickshaw driver. Squeezing through the back door, I was confronted by the very large rear end of an elephant, rocking from side to side and patiently undergoing a feverish makeover. It took the best part of four hours to cover her rough hide and she went on to win the coveted first prize; Not a bad example of inter faith cooperation.

Traditions die hard, and communities who have depended on the elephant in South East Asia, Indonesia and Africa have realised for a long time that their precious Pachyderms are under threat, both as a beast of burden and in their wild state. Numerous organisations have arisen from this need to help protect one of our great animal treasures.





A visit to the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage in Sri Lanka went some way to helping me understand the current situation. Continuing work in Tsavo National Park in Kenya to help save the African Elephant mirrors numerous other projects around the world. Daphne Sheldrick of the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust also heavily involved in Elephant protection said, "No animal triggers more heated debate within conservation circles than the elephant, for no animal has greater impact on the environment or is more "human" emotionally.

Its always good to hear of the work biologists, conservationists and passionate individuals have done which brings us closer to the idea of connecting with other members of the animal kingdom.

Photographers have been no less a part of these endeavours. In a previous column I have mentioned the extraordinary studio images of endangered wildlife by James Balog. Taken out of their natural environment, these animals, on the one hand appeared isolated and even forlorn, yet they retained many of the characteristics we are familiar with in the wild. In the last few years, fine art photographer, Nick Brandt has taken a different and perhaps more recognisable approach with his stylised depiction of African wildlife, elephants in particular, from the romantic to the ominous, and they are perhaps considered a eulogy to their place on this earth.

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Ref.

A Shadow Falls, (Abrams, 2009) Nick Brandt

The skies are filled with flying elephants, Gregory Colbert

The Elephant Whisperer by Lawrence Anthony

ISBN 1-933632-33-X

Publisher: Pan (7 May 2010) ISBN-10: 0330506684