



## Clever Jinna



he workers from the Forest Department who look after tame elephants are the mahuta (mahout) and kavadi. The mahuta is the driver, and the kavadi is the cleaner.

Every evening, tame elephants are set free in the forest after a bell is tied around their neck, with a heavy chain that trails on the ground. The elephants graze in the jungle until morning and then the mahuta or the kavadi brings back his own elephant, tracking it with the help of the trail left by the chain.

Elephants are usually obedient to their mahuta. Tame elephants are normally very peaceful. However, when an elephant is in musth its behavior changes. If the

mahuta is not sufficiently knowledgeable he may become the target of his elephant's ire. A magnificent tame bull elephant, Arjuna, was impossible to handle when in musth. He died of an overdose when a veterinarian tried to control him. Another elephant, Krishna, was known for his unusually shaped tusks; he killed his mahuta in anger after he saw him eat a coconut that had been gifted to the elephant!

One tame elephant was suffering from an injury on his back. His mahuta used to overwork him, loading and unloading timber. He forced the elephant to carry ten to fifteen loads a day as he was greedy for the ten rupees he would earn. One day, when I was talking to the Ranger, a fellow came running with the news that this elephant had collapsed. Normally elephants do not collapse; if they do, they do not get up again. I instructed the man to hurry and feed the elephant with flour. By this time the mahuta was already trying to do that, but in vain. If he had always shown the same concern and looked after the animal, it would not have been in such trouble. An innocent life was thus lost.

One of the mahutas not only drank toddy, but gave it to his elephant as well; this elephant got into the habit of carrying his mahuta, who would be senseless with drink, back to the camp.

The year I was in Karmadu, kumari cultivation was in full swing. The jenu kurubas would keep a watch on their fields throughout the night to protect their ragi crops. Once in a while I too would go to keep watch. I

would join the group that sat chatting around a fire for warmth. If a wild elephant came in that direction we could chase it away by shooting in the air or waving about a burning piece of firewood.

One night a watch party came running to my quarters and said, "Swami, the elephant Jinna has come to the kumari fields!"

Jinna was one of the tame elephants of the Forest Department. He was a bit of a rogue and would not allow anyone to come near him, except for his mahuta and kavadi. When a tame elephant came near the fields there was no point in shooting in the air; these elephants are not scared of fire either. In any case, Jinna would have had a bell tied to his neck.

I asked these people why they did not do anything until he came near the fields.

"Swami, we never know that he is coming. He always carries his bell in his trunk so it does not ring at all. The bell rings only when he reaches the fields and starts feeding." By then it would be too late to save the crop.

I was really surprised. I later learned that Jinna did not budge from the fields until his mahuta came and took him away. I went to the fields the next night to see for myself and discovered that the kuruba had been right about Jinna's ingenuity.

Perhaps Jinna realized that no one would harm him as a Forest Department elephant. By the time the tribal folk had searched for the mahuta and brought him to the fields, Jinna had eaten his fill. He would then follow

his mahuta as if nothing was the matter. The ringing of its bell could then be heard from a great distance!

*Kheddas* and *kappas*

Like teak, rosewood and sandalwood, the Forest Department valued tame elephants highly. Tame elephants play a very important role in the daily operations of the department and the handling of timber. I had read stories during my childhood that the Forest Department not only created and maintained a large army of elephants but also periodically conducted *khedda* operations in the Kakanakote jungles. After joining the Forest Department I went and saw this in action. The *khedda* used to be a part of official program of the Forest Department and took place once every few years.

*Kappa* is the local name of this method of catching elephants. The *kappa* is a pit that is about twelve feet wide and twelve feet deep. It cannot be dug just anywhere; it must be dug along a path used regularly by the elephants. The bottom of the pit is covered with a two-foot-thick bed of straw. The top of the pit is covered with bamboo and leaves so that the pit is not visible. When an elephant steps on it, the cover collapses and the animal falls into the pit. Because of the bed of straw at the bottom there is little possibility of the elephant breaking a leg. The helpless elephant is thereafter pulled out with the help of tame elephants and trained for service in the Forest Department.

At one time the department had officially conducted these operations to trap wild elephants. Keethiyanda Achchayya, a Forest Ranger, had become famous for trapping several hundred elephants while he was in Nagarahole. One elephant caught by Achchayya in the Titimati range was kept at the Mysore zoo, and attracted lots of visitors for his unusual height, size and very light-colored skin.

In those days, if an elephant under the care of a mahuta died or was sold by the department, the mahuta lost his job. He then had only one option to regain his job—to prepare a *kappa* to catch an elephant. The mahuta would then repair an old *kappa*, covering the pit with grass and leaves with great diligence. When an elephant fell into it, he would inform the department. Of course, the department officials would feign anger with the mahuta for doing this. In the official records it would be stated that the elephant had fallen into a pit by accident and had been rescued thanks to the Forest Department.

When I was a Forester in Bandihadlu, I received news one day that an elephant had fallen into a pit so I rushed to the place. Quite a few people followed me. A young elephant, about seven or eight years old, had fallen into a deep pit and its mother was circling around helplessly, unable to rescue it. Then a crowd gathered, and she was forced to move away. Soon, the tame elephants of the department reached the place and were

made to stand on either side of the *kappa*. The workers of the department cut tree branches and started filling up the *kappa*. Others waved a red cloth in front of the young elephant to distract it while a lasso was fastened around its neck. The lasso held a wooden wedge to ensure that it did not choke the elephant. The other end of the lasso was tied to a nearby tree. Another rope was tied to the elephant's leg. With great skill, the ropes were released or withheld to match the movements of the elephant. As the elephant climbed out of the pit, the tame elephants moved in from either side and walked the new member of their team to the camp. About sixty people participated enthusiastically in this entire operation.

*Kappa* is possible easier than *khedda* and the elephant does not get hurt. I never wanted to carry out such operations personally because I found them inhuman and cruel. With time, like *khedda*, even *kappa* was discontinued. And after the Indian Wild Life Protection Act came into force it was banned. Even then, sometime after 1975, I heard that an overenthusiastic new Forest Officer was thinking of reviving this practice. I got into action immediately and prevented his plans from succeeding.