

## New light on ancient Indian text on elephant

*Gajashastra*, a more than two thousand year old text on elephants, contains a lot of fanciful and mythical descriptions, but between these, 'hard data' are strewn<sup>1</sup>. An interesting aspect is that 'scent-flagging'<sup>2</sup> of the tail of a receptive female elephant, discovered as late as 1972, was described in *Gajashastra*. I wish to point out that a recent paper<sup>3</sup> describing behaviour patterns of a group of Asian elephants in England, sheds new light on an apparently nonsensical string of words in *sloka* 10, *Garvinilakshmanan*, in the above-mentioned text. This *sloka* contains an accurate observation, namely that a receptive female elephant flings up her tail<sup>1</sup>, and 'scent-flagging'<sup>2</sup> published in 1972 is the term for flinging the tail up (after rubbing the vagina region). But the description in *sloka* 10 also says that the tail is flung up in a head downwards stance. This was incomprehensible to us when we reported our reappraisal of *Gajashastra*<sup>1</sup>. Confusion increased on perusing

Edgerton's annotated translation<sup>3</sup> of *Matangalila*, the South Indian counterpart of *Gajashastra*, where he pointed out that in some old texts, the female elephant has been described/depicted as standing on her head while mating – apparently an ar-rant nonsense. Rees<sup>4</sup> describes a rare behaviour pattern – appeasement ritual of a she-elephant in the proximate presence of a male. The photograph and drawing show the stance of the she-elephant, almost in a seated posture but with head and trunk downwards as if broken at shoulder length. With this impression I reconsulted the *sloka* and found that it reads – the she-elephant stays (assumes a stance) with broken head, shoulder and trunk.

It now seems possible that initially the accurate ancient observers recorded scent-flagging of females in close proximity of males, so that the scent-flagging animal with tail erect flopped down and assumed the appeasement stance (in which the tail

is not flung up). Some of the later commentators or copywriters, who never observed these behaviour patterns in nature, translated 'head downwards, as if broken at shoulder level' as standing on head, although in *Gajashastra* the picture is realistic.

I thank Anita Bhattacharya for reexamining the Sanskrit text.

1. Bandopadhyay, Anita and Brahmachary, R. L., *Curr. Sci.*, 1999, **77**, 9–10.
2. Krishnan, M., *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.*, 1972, **69**, 298–321.
3. Edgerton, F., *The Elephant Lore of the Hindus*, Yale University Press, 1931.
4. Rees, P. A., *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.*, 2004, **101**, 71–78.

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## Faculty recruitment

The Indian Parliament has passed the Right to Information Bill, an important step towards a civilized and democratic society. Though the present letter has no *direct* relevance to that issue, I aspire that some relevance would be sensed at the end.

I want to write about faculty recruitment and the associated processes in various universities and institutes across the country. The first issue is: who would be recruited and how? No doubt institutions should have the sole authority to decide, since they know best their needs. After all, recruitments are meant for the benefit of the institutions and not for that of the recruits. And an interview is held to select the most suitable candidate. Occasionally, it so happens that a qualified person is pre-selected; an interview will later be held possibly to meet the official requirements. This is unjust. When a pre-selection is made, an interview to validate the selection is unfair to the other

applicants. It forces them to appear before a preoccupied interview board and waste their time and money. More importantly, it degrades their morale; everybody can sense when a selection committee is preoccupied. In such a situation, institutions should work out ways to make recruitment possible without holding an interview. Individuals should not be exploited even for the benefit of an institution.

The second issue is, by far, no less important. The general norm is not to inform those candidates who are not selected by an interview board. This is nothing but deprivation. When a university/institute advertises for such recruitments, it is generally mentioned that shortlisted candidates only will be called for the interview. Never is it stated that those who appear for the interview but are not selected, will not be informed. I believe, as many readers of this journal would, that it is the duty of the university/institute in such situations to intimate the outcome

to all candidates who appear before the selection committee. One can argue that this is an unrealistic proposal; sending such intimation would not be practically feasible. However, the very fact that these people could be sent call letters speaks against such an argument. By not intimating the results, the institutions deprive these candidates (who take the trouble to appear before the selection committee often without being paid any allowance) not only from the information but also from the recognition that they deserve. If the institutions act otherwise, that will indeed recognize the candidates' rights; at the same time, it will make the face of the academic institutions more humane.

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