



Discover India



APRIL 1995

Rs.40



DESTINATION
KERALA

UK £ 2.50 · France FF 35 · Germany DM 9 · USA US\$ 5 • UAE Dirhams 15 · Japan Yen 800



Discover India

APRIL 1995
VOLUME 8, No.4

...

Z

1M

...

Z

O

4

Destination Kerala
Text: Dr. Subhadra Menon

14

Tree of Abundance
Text: Seema Burman

15

KALARIPAYATU
Martial Culture
Text: Durga Dutt
Photographs: V. Muthuraman

20

Silken Sands
Text: Peter McManus

26

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM
A Good-Natured Tropical
City
Text: Purnima Sharma

31

Spice-Scented Shores
Text: Kunal Verma

34

KATHAKALI
Dramatic Dance
Text: T.S. Satyan

40

Inspiration and Innovation
Text: Subhra Mazumdar

42

The Kurichia Tribals of
Malabar
Text: P.K. Devan

46

Land of Rubber and
Spice
Text: Archana Sood

48

GURUVAYUR
The Earthly Abode of
Lord Krishna
Text and Photographs: Rakesh
Aggrawal



52

On a Slow Boat to
Alappuzha
Text: Uma Nair

58

Coastal Delights
Text: Uma Nair

60

PONMUDI
Glowing Amidst Cloud-
Filled Valleys
Text and Photographs: Nandu
Manjeshwar

62

Christmas in Kerala
Text: Subhash Chandra

63

Tusker Parade
Text: Mini Chandran Kurien

67

Harvest Time
Text: M.C. Kuruvilla

69

THEYYAM THIRA
Folk Theatre
Text: Jose George

72

PERIYAR
Misty Mornings Over
Tranquil Waters
Text: Vinod Lall

Discover India is published and produced by Media Transasia Ltd.. Room No. 202-203, Hollywood Centre. 233. Hollywood Road. Central Hong Kong. Tel: 2815 9111, Fax: (852) 2851 1933. Entire contents Copyright ~1995 Media Transasia Ltd. All rights reserved. Reproduction or translation in any language in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Requests for permission should be directed to Media Transasia Ltd. Opinions carried in Discover India are the writers' and not necessarily endorsed by Media Transasia. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited material unless accompanied by sufficient return postage. Nor is he responsible for material lost or damaged in transit. All correspondence regarding advertising or editorial should be addressed to Media Transasia Thailand Ltd., 14th floor, Orakam Building, 26, Chid 10m Road, Ploenchit, Bangkok 10330, Thailand. Tel: 2519905-7, Telex: 84003 MEDTRAN TH or Media Transasia (Inaia) PV1.Ltd. K-35. Green Park. New Delhi 110016, India. Tel: 6868775, Telex: 031-73262 MTIL IN. Fax: 011-6867641



AN ELEPHANT CALLED KESHAVAN

Text: Nihal Mathur

Choking with emotion, Raghu Prasad, a resident of Guruvayoor, said, "You can say, in our world of human beings, he was an elephant but in the world of elephants, he was definitely a human being!"

That was really a touching tribute to an elephant. But I understood what Raghu's powerful sentiment really meant. He was not talking about just any elephant. He was talking about Keshavan.

Keshavan is perhaps the most popular pachyderm Kerala has ever known in its ancient tradition of temple elephants. Keshavan's handsome bearing, good looks and gentle nature had not only made him the favourite of the temple authorities, to be used in all important rites and ceremonies, but had also endeared him to the public at large.

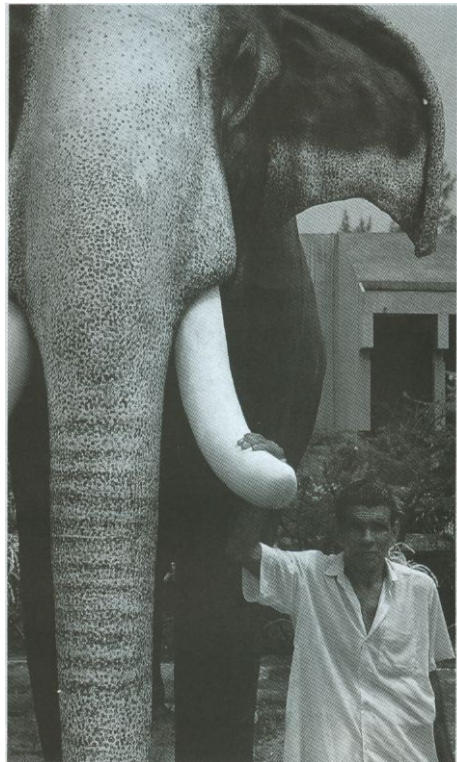
I came to know of this many years ago while researching for a documentary film on animals in Indian mythology and legend. Over the years the details kept coming in and then one day, in July, I found myself in the local bus bound for the temple town of Guruvayoor, in India's southern state of Kerala.

Palm fringed green paddy fields rushed past as I sat by the window seat and wondered about the tradition of temple elephants in Kerala. I knew that the forests of Kerala were home to the Wild Asian Elephant (*Maximus Indus*) and in the rich mythology and culture of India, the elephant was a powerful symbol. But when did the tradition of using the elephant in temple service start?

Neelkanth Namboodri of Poomali Mana, a Sanskrit scholar and a learned author who has translated a traditional treatise on elephants, told me that the earliest record of elephants in temple service goes back a 1000 years to the Peruvanam festival near Thrissur. Since then, there has been an unbroken tradition that has come down to our present times. Today, almost all the important temples in Kerala

have their own elephants. The famous temple of Vadakunnathan, for instance, has 8 elephants while Thiruvambady 4, Bhagwati 5 etc. But the largest number of 40 elephants are with the Guruvayoor temple and are housed in the sprawling complex called the *Punnathur Kota*.

One afternoon I went to see the elephants at the Punnathur Kota. Built by the kings of Punnathur in the 18th century, this property passed into the control of the Guruvayoor



administration. Its central building, once a kingly *quarter*, now houses the *mahouts* (trainers) while the surrounding open spaces accommodate the elephants. Traditionally the temple does not buy elephants. They are almost always received as gifts or donations from devotees. Keshavan was donated by the king of Nilambour in the year 1916 when he was aged 5.

Keshavan grew up at Guruvayoor and in his lifetime of 65 years, behaved so well that he came to be loved by all, especially, as the local people said, by Guruvayoorappan, the presiding deity of the temple. Keshavan served well, going to the temple regularly, carrying the

thidampu or the miniature version of the main idol in the sanctum, on its back.

A story I heard repeatedly from several people was about the Trichurpooram where annually a hundred elephants from all the important temples gathered in a spectacular display. Keshavan, for many years running had the special privilege of carrying the *thidampu*, marking him the leader. It so happened that one year, the *thidampu* was given to some other elephant. As



if deeply hurt, it is said that Keshavan simply left, not just the festive premises but Trichur town and headed straight back for Guruvayoor unaccompanied by his mahout.

I met V. Bala Pannicker, the last of the four mahouts that Keshavan had during his career. There was no doubt that Keshavan exhibited human-like emotions he said *but* more than that it was the intelligence of Keshavan that Bala recalled by telling me yet another story.

In 1976, the Guruvayoor administration shifted the elephant stables from around the temple premises to the Punnathur Kota, some 3 kilometres from the town. Once a fortress, the Kota was

surrounded by a deep moat that could be crossed over by a makeshift bridge of coconut tree trunks laid across it. Leading the line of elephants was Keshavan. coming upon the makeshift bridge, Bala said that he cannot forget the way Keshavan tested it by first gingerly putting his front foot on the coconut trunks to assess whether they could withstand his weight. It was a while before Keshavan was convinced the bridge was strong enough to negotiate and then confidently walked across it into the Kota while calling out to the rest to follow.

I met a lot of other people from various walks of life who spoke lovingly of Keshavan. In fact Keshavan commanded so vast an appeal that in the streets of Guruvayoor I found souvenir images of him being sold in the company of other gods and goddesses. Even inside the main temple, facing the main shrine, there is a photograph of Keshavan.

When Keshavan completed 60 serving years at the temple, the authorities celebrated its Diamond Jubilee in 1976. It was a grand affair and the title of *Gaja Raja* or the King of elephants was conferred upon him. It was at the time of *Ekadasi Mahotsav*, an annual festival which is celebrated with great fanfare in Guruvayoor. On the last day of this festival Keshavan breathed his last at 3 in the morning when the gates to the entrance were opened. It is said that in his dying moments he came running to face the temple and, raising his trunk in final farewell, passed away at what was considered to be an auspicious time and day. As in life as also in death, Keshavan created another legend.

Tragic at the loss, the temple and the people of Guruvayoor gave him a cremation befitting a noble person. The administration not only made a lifesize statue of Keshavan at the spot where he died but also declared that every year the temple would celebrate his death anniversary designating it as *Gaja Din* or the Day of the Elephant.

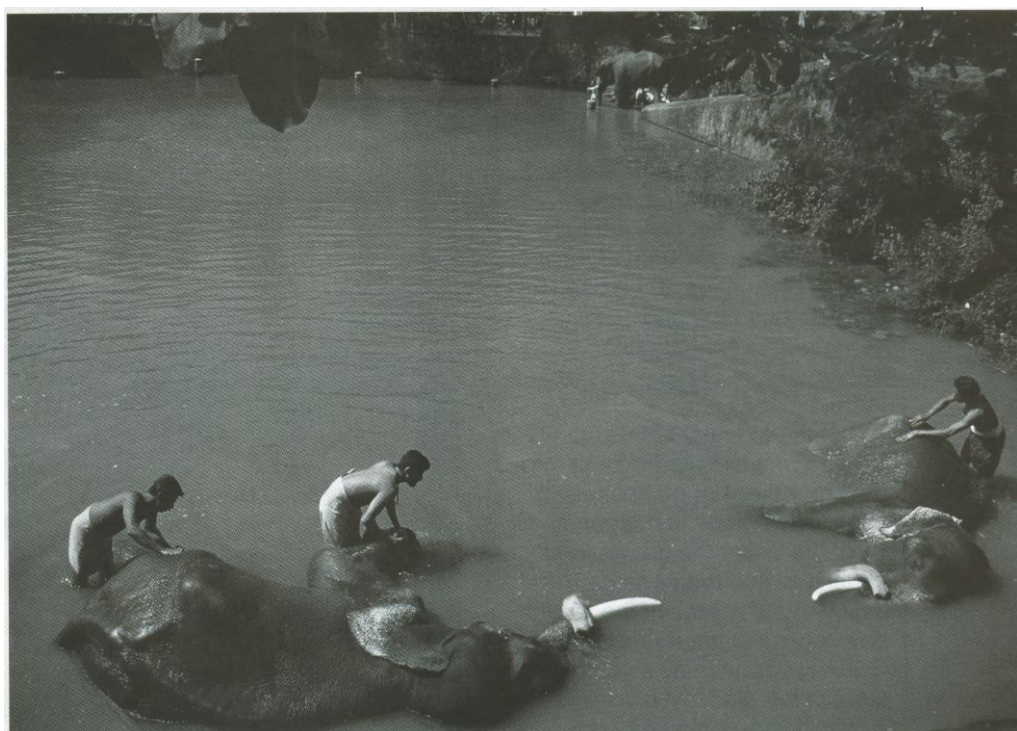
On that day all elephants of

Punnathur Kota come in a procession to the temple and, after getting ceremonially dressed for the occasion, perambulate the sanctum and finish at the statue of Keshavan. There the tallest elephant places a wreath of flowers. This is followed by a feast of fruits, boiled rice, sweets etc. that is given to all the elephants lined on the road across the statue. By midday the elephants return to the Kota.

I went to Punnathur Kota one

as I walked around the area dotted with coconut and mango trees, I found elephants wherever I looked!

Gopi, the livestock inspector, took me to see Laxmi, a frail looking female who was 77 years of age and the oldest elephant in the Kota. Padmanabhan 11 was everyone's favourite not because he was the tallest and most handsome but because he was considered a gentleman by temperament. In sharp contrast was Mughandhan who had come



afternoon to visit the elephants. I was greeted by a loud trumpeting and an incredible sight of 4 elephants in their ritual bath. A tusker in the tank threw up a big spray of water with its trunk while two more elephants were lying still by the water's edge; their mahouts busy scrubbing them. Another was dunking and rolling and playing in the water. Further up, next to an old but beautiful building, there was a line of more than 10 elephants. Huge balls of rice were being fed to them by their mahouts. As I walked further, I came upon a fierce-looking tusker tightly tethered by chains. This one was in heat, my guide told me. And then I came upon a row of enormous sheds. Under one each, there was an elephant and

to acquire a terrible reputation as a rogue that had killed a mahout. I enjoyed meeting the child of the family - little Keshavan II.

Donated by a businessman in 1992, Keshavan II was a playful little thing at age 7. Like a naughty boy he was lurching and lunging, flapping his ears, throwing his trunk around in the air, trying to break free of the chain around his hind leg. On seeing the bananas I held out, he calmed down. I could not help but wonder whether he would be able to live up to the reputation of his predecessor who had become a legend and a part of the collective cultural consciousness of the people of Kerala.