

The Divine Elephant: Asian Elephants in Religions and Religious Practices

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Abstract : The Asian elephant is predominantly found in South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. They are intrinsically associated with the religions, religious and cultural practices and festivals of these regions. Amazingly, these magnificent animals are also mentioned in the texts and are found sculpted on the walls of places of religious significance even in the Middle Eastern countries, and evidently, they have been mentioned in all the major religions. The elephants are intrigued and associated with the cultural and religious practices of Asians for thousands of years. While some of the practices and festivals in certain geographical regions are going on for years; some regions and religions have gone through a cultural shift and cultural adaptation, and have incorporated the participation of these divine beings. The symbolism of elephants is used for preaching and giving philosophical lessons through stories and painted art, across different religions through varying literary and visual artworks. The animals carved on the ancient and present day temples can easily be found in South and South East Asian countries, signifying the importance of the animal in a given religion which the temples are associated with. Though not sculpted but captive elephants are easily found on the premises of the places of worship to give a blessing to the people or to give a tour to show their own connotation with the religion. They are also used for carrying out processions in varying religious and cultural activities, and are considered to be of immense value as they add an extra glamour and publicize the wealth and weightiness of that distinct religion or culture. Our critical review of elephant's association with religions and their practices show, although they give a higher degree of value and respects to this animal, the practices do not match with their biological design, but profoundly compromise their welfare and conservation. It is time to follow the values the animal enjoy and use the same for their conservation and welfare.

Keywords : conservation, elephant, religion, welfare

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