

MOST URGENT

Dr Sudarsan
President
Cochin Devaswom Board
Thrissur
Kerala 680001

28 March 2024

Re: Request for temples to use realistic mechanical elephants for poorams and other processions and ceremonies to ensure the safety of elephants and devotees

Respected Sir:

I'm writing from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) India regarding the recent disturbing incident during the Arattupuzha Pooram in Thrissur district in which an elephant became upset by the fire, crowd, and noise and attacked another elephant in frustration, causing panic and injuries to the mahout and devotees and damage to several vehicles. The safety of the public was put in jeopardy by the use of elephants who are known to lash out when startled or upset.

Two elephants, Guruvayur Ravikrishnan and Puthuppally Arjunan, were used for processions for the Arattupuzha Pooram on 22 March. At around 10:30 pm, Guruvayur Ravikrishnan charged and attacked mahout Sreekumar and then chased Puthuppally Arjunan for almost a kilometre. Sreekumar narrowly escaped multiple further attempts by the upset elephant to attack him. This incident created severe panic among the thousands of devotees, including children, causing them to run haphazardly for safety.

The Times of India reported that "According to police, eight people, including a child, were injured during the ezhunnellipu ... procession held as part of the famous Arattupuzha Pooram festival. ... Among those injured, the condition of mahout Sreekumar and Narayanan, who fell from atop the elephant, is reported to be serious". It added, "Temple festivals in Kerala often witness inhumanely overworked elephants turning violent and running amok but Friday saw one tusker chase another for more than a mile, zig zagging through the thousands of Pooram fans."

A close look at the various videos of the incident available online clearly shows that Guruvayur Ravikrishnan was distressed by a fire torch waved by a ceremony participant nearby. Elephants, like humans, are naturally fearful of fire. Waving fire torches in close proximity to them can harm their skin, causing painful burns, and sparks can fly into their eyes. We understand that elephant Ravikrishnan, who was born in the wild, has a habit of throwing objects at visitors at the Punnathur Kotta of the Guruvayur Devaswom Board and has a history of foot problems, as observed in the 2014 report by the Animal Welfare Board of India.

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In order to avoid such dangerous situations in the future, we hereby request that you encourage Oorakathamma Thiruvadi Temple, Arattupuzha Sastha Temple, and all other temples under this Devaswom board to use lifelike mechanical elephants. A mechanical elephant can shake its head, move its ears, swish its tail, and lift its trunk and would help the temple ensure the safety of humans while providing a humane way to conduct rituals. The only costs involved in maintaining the “elephant” would be what is necessary for electricity and staff to accompany it during public interactions.

Pictures of the proposed mechanical elephant are enclosed as [Annexure 1](#). PETA India has already donated two life-size mechanical elephants: Irinjadapilly Raman ([Annexure 2](#)) to Irinjadappilly Sree Krishna Temple in Thrissur and Mahadevan ([Annexure 3](#)) to the Thrikkayil Mahadeva Temple in Kochi in recognition of both temples’ decisions to never own or hire live elephants and would be pleased to discuss donating mechanical elephants to other temples that wish to replace the use of real elephants. Irinjadapilly Raman and Mahadevan are now used to conduct ceremonies at their temples in a safe and cruelty-free manner, helping real elephants stay with their families in the jungle. These temples also rent the mechanical elephants out for rituals, wedding processions, and other occasions.

Elephants are highly intelligent, active, and social animals, and captivity denies them the vital activities and interactions that they need to be healthy and happy, including foraging for food, being on the move for various reasons (including the prevention of foot and leg problems), taking dust baths, swimming, and – most importantly – socialising with their families and other elephants in accordance with their nature. Additionally, there is a greater risk to public health and safety when elephants are held captive.

Many elephants in captivity in the country, including in Kerala, are being held illegally or have been transported to a different state without permission. Because elephants are wild animals who would not willingly obey human commands, when used for rides, ceremonies, tricks, and other purposes, they are trained and controlled through severe punishments, beatings, and the use of weapons with a metal-tipped hook. Many have extremely painful foot ailments and leg wounds from being chained to concrete for hours on end, and most do not get adequate food, water, or veterinary care, let alone any semblance of a natural life.

The frustration of captivity leads many elephants to develop and display abnormal behaviour. At their wit’s end, frustrated elephants often snap and try to break free, running amok and so harming humans, other animals, and property. According to figures compiled by the Heritage Animal Task Force, captive elephants killed 526 people in Kerala in a 15-year period. Thechikkottukavu Ramachandran, who has been in captivity for about 40 years and is one of the most often used elephants in Kerala’s festival circuit, has reportedly killed 13 individuals – six mahouts, four women, and three elephants.

We understand that the Cochin Devaswom Board is duty-bound to ensure the health and safety of devotees and protect the welfare of elephants, as we Hindus worship Lord Vinayaka. Because of the high risk to human health and safety and for the sake of elephants’ wellbeing, PETA India requests

that the Cochin Devaswom Board issue a circular to all temples under its command to introduce mechanical elephants in temples which require them for rituals and processions and to relinquish any elephants they may be keeping to a sanctuary where they can live chain-free, such as the Radhe Krishna Temple Elephant Welfare Trust or Wildlife SOS.

I can be contacted on 919910397382 or at KhushbooG@petaindia.org.

I look forward to your reply. Thank you for your attention.

Kind regards,



Khushboo Gupta
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PETA India

cc:

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Annexure 1 - Proposed mechanical elephant.



Annexure 2 - Raman donated to Irinjadappilly Sree Krishna Temple in Thrissur.



Annexure 3 - Mahadevan donated to the Thrikkayil Mahadeva Temple in Kochi.

