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Cc: Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI)
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08 September 2022

Dear Ms Laiju Mol,

URGENT OPEN LETTER OF CONCERN FOR THE WELFARE OF ELEPHANT MUKUNDAN AT PUNNATHUR KOTTA, GURUYAYUR

The [Pro Elephant Network](#) (PREN) consists of an international community of diverse individuals and

organizations, comprising specific expertise, on wild and captive African and Asian Elephants, including the fields of science, health, conservation, welfare, economics, community leadership, social justice and the law.

We would like to congratulate you as the first woman manager to take charge of the Punnathur Kotta, in Guruvayur temple. We hope that you bring a renewed vision and fairness to the pressing issue of captive Elephant welfare and wish you the best.

We are writing with great concern about the deteriorating health of Elephant Mukundan, one of the forty-four Elephants currently housed at the Punnathur Kotta.

A recent video of him walking with great difficulty, with multiple chains hanging down his swollen and deformed ankles, and in visible pain has been shared with us by concerned citizens from Kerala. It appears that the untreated fracture in his left hind leg is now completely twisted and ankylosed.

As you might be aware, Mukundan was gifted to the temple in 1986 at the young age of six, which means that he has spent close to four decades working in chains in the Kotta.

The untreated fracture and the subsequent ankyloses were initially highlighted in the 2014 Animal Welfare Board of India Report, where it was noted that *“due to severe torture by application of iron objects the left leg has internal and external injuries”*. The veterinary assessment in the same report recorded that there was an abscess at the left elbow.



Image Credit: Elephant Cruelty

This chronically disabled Elephant is obviously finding it very difficult and painful to walk. His whole anatomy has become abnormal, due to compensation, which relates to the old fracture. He should be immediately retired into a sanctuary where he could at least move around at will and strengthen his atrophied muscles.

The 2014 AWBI report is a detailed, scientific official record of the *very poor* conditions and management of elephants who are kept in the Punnathur Kotta. The report highlights the fact that almost fifty Elephants are kept in a wholly inadequate, eleven-acre facility, where they are offered little or no exercise, inadequate shelters, excessive tethering and no opportunity for freedom or socialisation.

The Hindu, a widely respected national Indian newspaper, affirmed the findings of the report, in April 2015, stating: “The report shows that all the Elephants at the Punnathur Kotta sanctuary are chained with absolutely no exercise. Often, these chains cut into the skin or become embedded in the flesh and have to be surgically removed. The animals are in complete solitude for about 23 hours; some are chained by one hind and one fore leg, while for others it is the hind legs and one fore leg.”¹

Furthermore, we are concerned that Mukundan is, kept chained 24 hours a day/seven days a week, forced to stand on a hard cement pavement, without any respite or relief. There is no justification for keeping him in such strict confinement while he is barely capable of walking.

India’s Central Zoo Authority (CZA) has suggested a minimum of two-acre space per captive elephant. However, the forty-four elephants, mostly bulls, are crammed into an eleven-acre land. Males come into their annual musth cycle around the same time. The testosterone levels rise steeply making them more aggressive; all attempts to manage males through isolation, separation and confinement, impact their welfare.²

Elephants are highly cognitive and can demonstrate empathy and self-recognition, and display concern for other distressed and dying Elephants. Their cultural learnings are passed through their generations.³ They are highly sentient beings and require opportunities for individual autonomy and socialization. When these essential needs cannot be met, health deterioration and stereotypy generally reflect the welfare-compromised environment and stereotypic behaviour remains the most widely used welfare indicator for elephants.⁴ Stereotypy, the invariant restrictive and purposeless repetition of motor patterns,⁵ is in fact commonly seen in captive Elephants that are held in impoverished conditions. Exposure to psychological stress has direct physiological consequences that impact the body’s ability to function.⁶ This includes neural disfunctions, brain damage⁷ and premature death.⁸

¹ <https://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/rukmini-sekhar-on-the-plight-of-temple-elephants/article7796436.ece>

² Dr Rob Atkinson & Dr Keith Lindsay, 2022. Expansive, diverse habitats are vital for the welfare of elephants in captivity

³ Poole J & Granli P. 2009. Mind and movement: Meeting the interests of elephants. In: Forthman DL, Kane LF & Waldau PF (Eds.) *An Elephant in the Room: The Science and Well-being of Elephants in Captivity*. Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine’s Center for Animals and Public Policy, Tufts University, pp.2-21.

⁴ Williams, E, Chadwick, CL, Yon, L & Asher, L (2018) A review of current indicators of welfare in captive elephants (*Loxodonta africana* and *Elephas maximus*). *Animal Welfare*, 27(3): 235-249

⁵ Mason G. J. 1991. Stereotypies: a critical review. *Animal Behaviour*, 41:1015-1037.; Kurt F & Garaï M. 2001. Stereotypies in captive Asian Elephants- a symptom of social isolation. Scientific Progress Reports in: *A Research Update of Elephants and Rhinos*. Proceedings of the International Elephant and Rhino Research Symposium, Vienna June 7-11,2001. pp.57-63.

⁶ Romero LM. 2004. Physiological stress in ecology: lessons from biomedical research. *TRENDS in Ecology and Evolution*, 19(5):249-255.; Bondi CO, Rodriguez G, Gould GG, Frazer A & Morilak DA. 2008. Chronic unpredictable stress induces a cognitive deficit and anxiety-like behavior in rats that is prevented by chronic antidepressant drug treatment. *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 33:320-331.

⁷ Professor Bob Jacobs et al, 2021. Putative neural consequences of captivity for Elephants and cetaceans ([PDF Putative neural consequences of captivity for Elephants and cetaceans \(researchgate.net\)](#))

⁸ Clubb R., Rowcliffe M., Lee P., Mar K.U., Moss C. & Mason G.J. 2008. Compromised survivorship. *Science*, 322:1649. Wiese & Willis 2004 Calculation of longevity and life expectancy in captive Elephants

A 'Sanctuary' is defined as an area where animals live in their habitats *with no interference*. The key requirement of a sanctuary is that the animals are free and can exercise some form of autonomy. Unfortunately, at Punnathur Kotta the chained Elephants are not offered the same opportunities.

Elephants are a National Heritage, Schedule 1 animal in India, which entitles them to the highest degree of protection, even when in captivity.

We share with you the admiration and love for Elephants as majestic and wonderful creatures, who deserve our utmost respect, protection and care when needed.

Considering all the above,

1. As a matter of urgency, we request you to allow a team of independent experts to examine Mukundan, provide him with urgent medical care and treatment and develop a plan for his long-term rehabilitation.
2. We advise that the Guruvayoor temple urgently implements the 2014 AWBI report recommendations.
3. We also request the temple management to open its doors for independent scrutiny of all improvements at the Kota in the last eight years, as per the report attached to this letter.

We, as a global network of Elephant experts, would like to extend our support to achieve the best solutions. Please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Thank you for your consideration and attention to this matter,

Yours sincerely,



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