Working with Dr. Krishnamurthy

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Dr. Krishnamurthy passed away on the 9th of December, leaving the field of veterinary science, wildlife research, forest conservation and zoo management grappling for a fitting successor. He had been a vital link between the common man, scientists and forest-managers bonding people with his quick wit, deep knowledge, cheerful interaction and contagious enthusiasm for his chosen work. He could point out mistakes without invoking ill-will just as easily as he could graciously accept criticism from his juniors.

The Asian Elephant Conservation Centre, Bangalore is preparing an elephant management manual that is yet to be published. Dr. Krishnamurthy, *Doc* or *Dr. K*, as we fondly addressed him, was one of the authors of the book. I was appointed to compile and coordinate the progress of the manual. Although at that time it had felt like we were contemporaries working together on a project, I realize it was a wonderful opportunity for me to interact with *Dr. K*. My job was to "comment", "correct" and "improve" on the chapters written by *Dr. K*. and Oh! I took my job ever so seriously. I gave many suggestions and offered corrections, largely thanks to the assurance from *Doc* that neither his ego nor my limited knowledge of elephants would come in the way of improving the text. Urging, scolding or reminding *Doc* about pending deadlines was another duty I took on with great fervour. The ever so busy schedule of his "retired" life always slowed down the progress of the manual. However, when *Doc* did put pen on paper, the cogency with which the subject was presented in his delightful "old English" written out neatly in old-fashioned ink-pen left little scope for comments.

I would meet *Doc* at Chennai Snake Park or at his residence. At Snake Park *Doc* would be advising, instructing, joking and chatting with all the staff and I would join in and enjoy the cheerful atmosphere. Sitting down to discuss work with *Dr. K* at his house was always a pleasure. *Doc* would be sitting by the window and reading and would greet me even as I entered the gate. I would settle down with a cup of coffee and hand out work schedule, corrected drafts and reference papers and our discussions would take off from there.

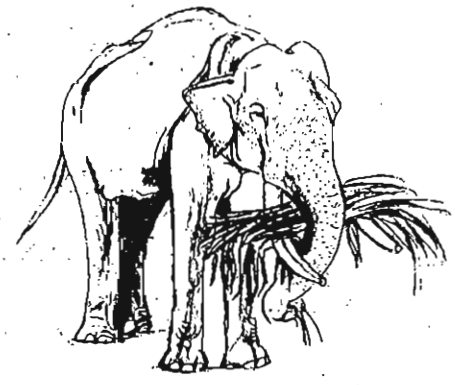
Elephant facts would come tumbling out, research papers, articles and books would come out of his "magic" cupboard with me greedily reading 10 papers at a time. Added to that would be hilarious anecdotes, jokes dating back to his veterinary college days, veterinary practice days at Mudumalai and Topslip or research days at Mudumalai. *Doc* would also pull out his correspondence file and show me letters written to him by various people – controversies, honours alike - and make me feel like my opinion really mattered. I would come away bursting with more ideas, renewed enthusiasm and of course a lot of reading material.

This is the experience as far as discussion on the subject goes. Making field trips with *Doc* was a very thrilling experience. He would alight at the station with two heavy bags and would refuse to allow the "lady" carry it, insisting that two heavy bags on both hands would balance out the burden. On a drive from Top slip and Mudumalai, I remember riding at the back of the jeep, twisting and turning to glimpse at the various tree species, historical places, elephant corridors and any other interesting landmark we passed by pointed out by *Doc* in rapid succession.

At the camps and offices he would magnanimously introduce me as a colleague rather than a far removed junior working under him. Needless to say, researchers, senior officials, mahouts, trackers, local people alike ran to greet, seek advice and interact with *Doc*. Elephants would be presented before him and they would eagerly come forward to greet their old friend. *Doc* would stand in front of the elephants, looking up in total command and affection. He would make a routine check-up of their health condition and advice on medication, if any, to be given. *Doc* would turn to me and tell me all about the individual elephants, remembering to the exact detail, dates of birth, translocation, mating and other events. From his old "girl friend" Kamatchi to his precious ward Murthy the personalities of each individual elephant came alive to me.

In all this overenthusiasm I most often overlooked the fact that my colleague, though young at heart, was an aged man. *Dr. K* would never admit when he was tired or needed to rest. I learnt from people who knew him well, to force him to rest or insist he take a vehicle or travel in reasonable comfort, where he would gallantly say " No need, no problem". *Dr. K* would joke to people that his schedule was in my hands and that he was entirely at my disposal. Later he would also ask me anxiously whether he had talked too much or dominated the conversation. Of course, I always noted that he was never un-welcome wherever he went and always thought to be a delightful conversationalist.

In writing an article on *Doc* there is no need to eulogize about his knowledge and love of elephants, his sense of humour, his simple down-to-earth ways, lack of airs of seniority or his generous nature - that would be stating the obvious. Through this article I would like to share with people that I too had the wonderful opportunity to appreciate all these qualities in *Dr.K* and work with him in his last years.



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