

## THE ELEPHANT FESTIVAL

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*With over 100 elephants, the Jaipur Elephant Festival is the world's biggest of its kind. Started by an ex member of the Maharajah's household staff, it celebrates thousands of years of close relationship between Indians and elephants.*

It is time for the Festival to begin in Chaugam stadium. To the opening fanfare of marching bands and amid the swirling dancers in traditional 'rajput' robes, 100 elephants parade in front of the 4000 spectators who have come to watch the world's biggest elephant festival, here in Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan.

The festival celebrates the close relationship Indians have always had with elephants, in times of war and peace alike. Used for construction work, transport and deforestation, elephants also protected the subcontinent's borders. Alexander the Great is said to have turned back from his Indian conquests partly because he was told the armies he would face included thousands of elephants, compared to the hundreds who had already badly mauled Macedonian ranks.

### **The warriors of Rajasthan**

In honor of this, many military uniforms can be found in the parade, such as those worn by the riflemen on camel-back, once part of the Maharaja's armed forces, or the red uniforms of the British colonial army.

The brass bands suddenly stop playing and make way for the dandya dance, in which opponents face off, each armed with two sticks with which they fence to the beat of the drums.

### **Abdul Rasheed, the mahout**

Inspecting all this with a critical eye is Mr Abdul Rasheed, president of the Elephant Association of Jaipur.

"For generations, my family have worked with elephants." Mr Rasheed, now aged 70, explains, "back in the days when we worked for His Highness." 'His Highness' refers to the Maharajah of Jaipur, who in the days of the British Raj kept over 100 elephants. The elephants were kept as a symbol of wealth and prestige and were used to take important guests on rides through the Maharajah's estates and go on hunting safaris.

The Maharajah's wealth, however, depended greatly on stipends, levied from local taxes, first as a deal to secure his loyalty to the Raj, and then, after Indian independence in 1947, to secure this same loyalty to the new Indian state. These allowances, however, proved to be too much of a burden on the population and were eventually curtailed.

"His highness' estate could no longer afford the upkeep of so many elephants, so most of them were given away and my family found itself unemployed."

But far from giving up on his traditional profession, Mr Rasheed hit upon the idea of organizing elephant rides for tourists at nearby Amber fort. He contacted small Rajahs, local rulers, in neighboring towns and villages, and along with the Maharajah's remaining three elephants, started organizing the excursions. The Elephant Association of Jaipur was born, at first with just over a dozen elephants and owners, but steadily growing until, in the mid 70's, the Rajasthan board of tourism asked them to help set up the festival.

### **"Miss Elephant"**

It is time for the beauty contest : Half a dozen elephants, ridden by their respective owners and led by their mahouts, step forward in a line and face the spectators.

Judges move from one Elephant to the next, stopping to judge each one on its body paint,

which covers its front from head to toe, its elaborate costume, as well as that of its owner and its mahout. Their decision will be announced at the end of the festival.

The elephants are all female, who are more docile than their male counterparts. None come from Rajasthan but are imported from other parts of India, from Bengal or Kerala in the south. "His Highness tried to have them breed here, and so have we, but so far without success."

Next comes the tug of war. The names of 16 tourists are called out and these fortunate, or unfortunate, few, are lined up along two ropes tied to a single elephant. They grab hold of the ropes and at a signal from the umpire, the contest begins... and ends a few seconds later as the human contestants are immediately dragged effortlessly, screaming and laughing, by the elephant. Needless to say, in all the festival's history, never once has an elephant lost.

The next event is the polo match. Two teams wielding oversize polo sticks hurl themselves on a ball that quickly disappears under huge feet. From this mad scrum one elephant finally emerges and, the others in hot pursuit, its rider smashes the ball towards the goal and scores.

"In his highness' day, they would organize fights between male elephants, but of course that is forbidden nowadays."

### **Trumpeting into the future**

Customs and attitudes towards animals may have improved, but this change is still considered insufficient by many.

Madhulall Valliate is a veterinarian from the state of Kerala in the south of India, and is very familiar with elephants. He works for 'Helping Suffering', an NGO that has set up a health program for Jaipur's elephants.

When we first arrived here, there wasn't even a shelter to protect them from the sun, and these are animals used to long periods in the shade of forest canopies.

Madhu and his team vaccinate the elephants and cure the many wounds and infections that are often caused by the poor hygienic conditions in which they are kept.

"Above all, we are trying to change the owners' and mahouts' attitudes towards these animals, so that they see them as something other than simple tools of their trade."

The festival is coming to an end, the names of the beauty contest's winners are announced over the loudspeakers, and the lucky few owners come to claim their prizes, which they then parade in front of the crowd.

Today we are on the eve of India's Holi festival, so the day ends with spectators riding on the elephants' backs and merrily throwing colored powder at each other.