

Unchaining the elephants – and the minds of our zoo managers

We agreed to disagree. That may be a polite expression to describe the interview a group of 'ele-friends' (Rumana, Mahera, Sajjad and Naeem) had with the Director of the Karachi Zoo. The more we systematically enumerated our well-rehearsed roles and arguments, the more we realised that two sides were not 'on the same page'. Our conclusion – there is no way the elephants in our zoos could be unchained – till the minds of the Zoo Managers remained chained to the era of the 'Company Bahadur'.

The American Association of Zoos considers solitary housing of elephants as an act of exceptional cruelty. To chain them is to multiply that cruelty a hundred times. Regrettably, those responsible for elephants in Pakistan are simply incapable of imagining any other existence for these friendly animals except chains, cells, confinement and the prison-like surroundings of a zoo.

Given as a gift (free of cost) by the Tanzanian Government, the Zoo showed the deal as 'purchase from contractor' at a cost of Rs.9.9 million per elephant. So while 'Noor Jehan' and 'Madhubala' brought prosperity and fortune to the Zoo management, they could not imagine that their own lives would become an unending saga of torture and agony. The zoo managers consumed millions of rupees and spent some four years to build two wretched and miserable cells (ironically called 'rest rooms') to house the two elephants. The cells are lined with tiles and cement to afflict extra pain and injuries, while the area of the cell is just enough to snugly fit a restrained elephant.

Elephants live with their families and in complete freedom in their natural habitats in jungles. They enjoy long walks, plucking tree branches and taking mud baths. By housing them in narrow prison-like surroundings and keeping them chained for long hours, the Zoo management is indulging in a criminal activity, punishable under the Cruelty to Animals Act.

On a practical note, one does not foresee either a change of heart or a change of mind on the part of the officials responsible for the Zoos of Pakistan. They simply do not see anything wrong with how they treat the elephants. A society that does not show care and kindness towards its animals cannot be expected to act humane towards its citizens. Will the animal loving people of Pakistan come forward and demand that all elephants be 'unchained' and moved from their cells to sanctuaries. Will they raise their voice – loud enough to be heard in the heartless and mindless corridors of power.