

# *Jumbo Tales of Calcutta Zoo*

**T**HE gentle giants, Elephants, are a favourite among zoo visitors of all age groups. Sadly the elephants of our zoos are bidding adieu. The Central Zoo Authority (CZA) in the year 2009 had ordered zoos and circuses to move all their elephants to Wildlife Sanctuaries

and parks. As things stand, sooner or later all elephants will bid us goodbye. To see them one will have to visit sanctuaries and wildlife parks.

Apart from the forests there will remain only one place where the jumbos can be seen – the Calcutta Zoological Gardens or the Alipore Zoo. On the request of the Calcutta Zoo the CZA has allowed the Calcutta Zoo to keep its star

attractions but on the condition that one out of the three elephants will have to be moved out and the area of the open-air enclosure of the elephants would be increased from 3000 sq m to 9000 sq m.

The Calcutta Zoo has accepted these conditions gladly and has decided to send the youngest of the three elephants housed there named “Uttara” to a rescue centre in North Bengal. Elephants “Mumtaz” and



The triumvirate of the Calcutta Zoo (above)  
Elephants at their retiring space (left)

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“Phulwanti” will continue to live in the zoo. This implies that the bond between the 139-year-old Calcutta Zoo and the gentle giants will remain unbroken.

The Calcutta Zoo was founded in 1875 but was opened to the public on 1st May 1876. The zoo was inaugurated by Edward VII who was at that time the Prince of Wales. Edward VII gifted the zoo a leopard and two young elephants which were probably the first elephants of the zoo.

One will be surprised to learn that in the beginning the elephant was not a popular zoo animal. It was costly to keep and the Indian public took little interest in them, which also implies that at that period the elephants were quite a common animal. They were seldom permanently exhibited in the zoo. Dr. John Anderson,

the first superintendent of the Indian Museum and acting superintendent of the Calcutta Zoo, in his Guide to the Calcutta Zoological Gardens (1883) writes, “Their number in the gardens varies according as they are in demand for export or exchange. They are kept, in all weathers, merely under the shade of some trees, as this has been found amply sufficient for their comfort and health.”

The first superintendent of the zoo, Ram Brahma Sanyal, in his *Handbook of the Management of Animals in Captivity in Lower Bengal* (1892) mentions that, “In proportion to its costliness it is not an attractive animal, especially to the Indian public, and is therefore not always exhibited in the Gardens; one or two young animals are, however, generally on view during the cold weather awaiting transmission to some zoological society in Europe, or Australia.”

British ornithologist, prolific author and the first assistant superintendent of the Indian Museum, Frank Finn, in the *Hamlyn’s Menagerie Magazine* of June 1917 too corroborates this fact, “We seldom had elephants and then only young ones destined to go elsewhere, the elephant being so well known that he did not justify the large expense.”

Irrespective of this fact some of the elephants that were kept here whether for a short period or a long period have left their footprints on the pages of natural history. Let’s take a look at some of Calcutta Zoo’s immortal elephants.

### Elephant that Weathered a Storm

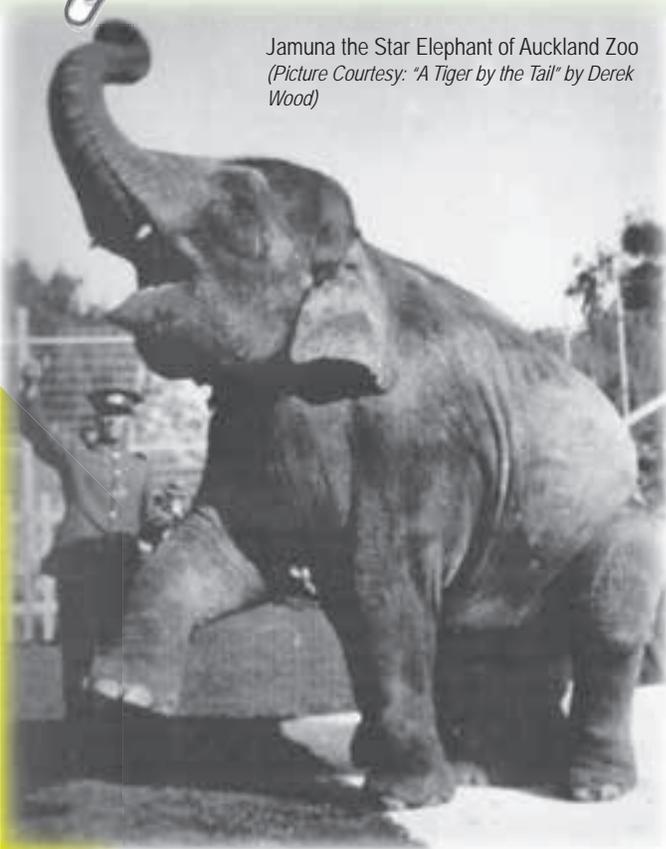
This Calcutta Zoo elephant earned laurels for his intelligence and attracted the attention of the world community. Both Dr. John Anderson as well as Ram Brahma Sanyal have mentioned this incident in their respective works which have been mentioned earlier.

The young elephant was sent to the Melbourne Zoological Gardens in 1883 and its sea voyage from Calcutta to Melbourne was an adventurous one. This young elephant weathered the storm that was encountered in the journey with its intelligence and safely landed in Melbourne to become the talk of the town. This incident is recorded as follows: “As a terrific storm was encountered which cleared the deck of the ship, but the wise brute held on by its trunk to an iron bar on the leeside of the vessel until the storm abated.”

### Elephant that Frightened a Man-eating Tiger

C.T. Buckland who was the president of the erstwhile management committee of the Calcutta Zoo, in the *Longman’s Magazine* (1890) tells about a man-eating tiger which was scared of a young elephant! Mr. Buckland writes, “We had two very fine man-eating tigers...They had killed many human beings before they had been caught alive in pitfalls, and they had not forgotten it. But the large male of this pair was a coward, and at

Jamuna the Star Elephant of Auckland Zoo  
(Picture Courtesy: "A Tiger by the Tail" by Derek Wood)



Left: Pa Wa the White Elephant with Dr. Min  
(Picture Courtesy: www.elephant.se)

*Actually this white elephant was an albino and had pink eyes. Since Hindus consider the mythological White Elephant as Aravat, there was a mad rush to see him.*

*"Jamuna" a female elephant lived in the Calcutta Zoo in the 1920s. She was sent to Auckland Zoo as a gift in 1923 and overnight became the star of the Auckland Zoo.*

the sight of a small tame elephant in front of his den he would run into his inner compartment and hide himself. He had never seen an elephant in his native wilds, but he did not like the look of it."

### Jamuna – Star of New Zealand Zoo

Never before has an elephant enjoyed such popularity as "Jamuna". This female elephant lived in the Calcutta Zoo in the 1920s. She was sent to Auckland Zoo as a gift in 1923 and overnight became the star of the Auckland Zoo.

She was gentle with the children and soon gained immense popularity. She passed away in 1965 and as a mark of love for this elephant the area outside the old elephant house in the Auckland Zoo is now named "Jamuna Plaza" after her.

Her arrival in New Zealand was widely covered in the press. She arrived by the ship named "Waitomata" and when she refused to walk down the gangway she was lifted by a crane by fixing a canvas sling fixed round her body and brought to the shore. "Jamuna" was accompanied by her Indian keeper Attar Ali.

*The New Zealand Herald* Volume LX issue 18420 dated 8th June 1923

ividly described the landing of Jamuna. According to it, "Jamuna is no ordinary elephant, according to Mr. L.T.Griffin, Assistant Curator of the Auckland Museum. She is, as elephants go, a lady of high caste, and the superintendent of the Calcutta Zoo stated that she was one of the finest elephants ever received at the zoo." The superintendent's words came to be so true.

### White Elephant

Calcutta Zoo witnessed a never before rush between the period June to August 1928 because of the exhibition of a White Elephant. Actually this white elephant was an albino and had pink eyes. The albino elephant was named "Pa Wa" and was owned by a private exhibitor named Dr. Saw D. Po. Min, a myanmarese citizen.

Dr. Min belonged to the Karen tribe of Myanmar and had captured the elephant in November 1919. He had taken his elephant to America where it was displayed in circuses amazing people no end. He also took the elephant to the London Zoo from where it was finally brought to the Calcutta Zoo in 1928.

Since Hindus consider the mythological White Elephant Aravat as Carrier of Indra there was a mad

rush to see this living sacred elephant! Unfortunately this albino elephant died at the Calcutta Zoo on 25th August 1928.

According to the Centenary Volume of the Calcutta Zoo (1875-1975), "The Zoo was lucky to have a rush of visitors who considered a white elephant to be 'Living Deity', but the owner was unlucky to have lost it so suddenly." The death of this elephant even made it to the news in the United States. The *New York Times* of August 26, 1928 reported, "Pa Wa, the sacred white elephant, which small children visiting the London Zoo in 1927 were not allowed to ride as they could other pachyderms, died last night in distant Calcutta."

### Elephants Who came to Party

Viceroy Linlithgow and his wife threw a children's party at their Calcutta residence at Belvedere (now known as the National Library) on 28th December 1939. Belvedere used to be the Calcutta residence of the viceroy and the viceroy's were known to annually visit Belvedere during the Christmas holidays to open the Calcutta festivity season with flower shows, children's party, Zenana party, dog shows, races, theatricals, etc. all lined up.

The prime attractions of this children's party were two elephants of the Calcutta Zoo named "Begum" and "Joymala". They were sent to Belvedere to carry the trumpeter and Father Christmas (Santa Claus) for the children's party. The Report of the Managing Committee of the Calcutta Zoo 1939-40 (Calcutta



Police Officer Ronny Moore who killed the killer elephant "Phoolmala" (Picture Courtesy: Anglo Indian Welfare Association)

Gazette dated 24.4.1941) reported the achievements of their elephants with pride. The Viceroy and his wife as well as the guests thoroughly appreciated the elephant's antics.

When the Second World War began, the Calcutta Zoo was turned into a military camp. All the animals were either destroyed or given away to other zoos. "Joymala", the star of the Viceroy's children's party and another zoo elephant named "Phoolmala", were sent to Chakdihi in Nadia District of West Bengal. "Begum", the other star elephant, had already died before Great Britain was plunged into the World War.

### The Killer Elephant

August 19, 1963 will always be etched in Calcutta Zoo's history as a black day or rather a bloody day. That day a mahout (elephant trainer and keeper) of the Calcutta Zoo named Farman Mia was trampled and killed by the zoo's rather tame elephant "Phoolmala". This was not the end of it. "Phoolmala" ran amok in the zoo and the zoo was shut.

Keeping the welfare of other animals and birds housed in the zoo in mind a hard decision was taken to put down the elephant. An Anglo-Indian Police officer Mr. Ronald Allan Moore who at that time was the Assistant Commissioner of the 2nd Battalion of Calcutta Armed Police was summoned to discharge this rather frightful duty. Mr. Ronald popularly called Ronnie was approached because he was a fearless officer and had a reputation of culling rogue elephants in Assam and Tripura.



Elephant of the Calcutta Zoo enjoying a munch

Mr. Moore entered the zoo on foot and shot the killer elephant thrice killing her. This ended the brief reign of terror that the female jumbo had unleashed. Ronald Moore's son Peter Moore in an essay titled "An Ordinary Bloke" writes that his father killed this killer elephant with great regret. After the elephant was killed the zoo was shut for the next two days for the disposal of the carcass, which by no means was an easy job.

### Elephant who Cured Primate Constipation

In the 1970s, the Calcutta Zoo had a huge female jumbo named "Shahzadi". She soon became a doctor obviously without her knowledge! Actually this jumbo had an uncanny power to strike terror into the hearts of the animals and birds of the zoo, so much so that some of the constipating chimpanzees and monkeys readily eased themselves because of the fright!

100 years of Calcutta Zoo (1875-1975) also mentions a very interesting incident

where "Shahzadi" played an important role in netting the zoo's escaped chimpanzee named "Caroline". On an October morning in 1970, sick chimp "Caroline" somehow escaped from the Zoo Hospital Yard. She climbed a high branch of a Rain tree and no amount of cajoling from her keepers and other zoo staff could bring her down. Even her favourite ice-cream was offered to her but in a whiz she ran away with the ice-cream back to the tree top. Exasperated, the zoo staff thought of bringing their last and best bet -- "Shahzadi" the elephant.

She was brought in and led towards the tree on which "Caroline" was enjoying her freedom. The loud trumpeting of "Shahzadi" forced the frightened chimp down the tree. The chimp was driven into a box and captured.

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