

Mahagiri, the village elephant

A story from India

Key Ideas: respect for all creatures, pride in work, priorities

Mahagiri was born in a small Indian village. He was a very happy baby and soon began to play with the other babies while his mother worked. She helped to pull logs from the forest to the river where they were floated down to the big town at its mouth. Each evening the young village boys took the grown-up elephants to the river and washed them in the cooling waters, and the baby elephants liked to go too!

Mahagiri grew and grew - everyone loved him. Soon he was bigger than his mother. One day her master decided she should go into peaceful retirement and Mahagiri should take her place. The first day he helped drag logs to the river he felt very proud.

One day the villagers were preparing to celebrate a national holiday. The men made a new flagpole and dug a hole in the square to put it in. The women carefully sewed the national flag. In school the boys and girls practised songs and dances. Mothers made sweets and cakes and fathers set up stalls and held band practices.

And Mahagiri was chosen to carry the new flagpole to its resting place. A magnificent coat was made for him and, after careful washing, his face and trunk were beautifully decorated with coloured chalks.

The day arrived. The square filled with excited villagers, the children sang and danced and Mahagiri, carrying the flagpole, approached the hole. But as he reached it, he suddenly backed away.

Everyone laughed. He was teasing! Three times this happened. But the onlookers were becoming impatient. His master tapped him gently with his stick, then more harshly. The singing faltered. The villagers began to drift away. Still Mahagiri refused to lower the pole. Finally, his master angrily dragged him away in disgrace and tied him up behind one of the huts nearest to the forest.

The celebration continued, but some of the joy had been lost. As evening approached, the master returned and roughly began to pull the elephant towards his home. But as they passed the hole in the square Mahagiri refused to move. Suddenly he caught his master around the waist with his trunk and lifted him high into the air. The few remaining spectators watched terrified. Was he going to drop him into the hole?

Mahagiri held his master just above the hole and suddenly, as his anguished cries decreased, he realised that at the bottom of the hole cowered a little mouse. It would have been killed had Mahagiri obeyed his master.

The news spread quickly. The villagers returned and Mahagiri was patted and fed sweetmeats. 'If only we had looked', they said, 'If only we had thought about why Mahagiri should suddenly act this way!'