

Return to Cyberspace Law Web Page www.uiowa.edu/~cyberlaw/csl03

“Six Blind Men and An Elephant”: A Fable

A long time ago in the valley of the Brahmaputra River in India there lived six men who were much inclined to boast of their wit and lore. Though they were no longer young and had all been blind since birth, they would compete with each other to see who could tell the tallest story.

One day, however, they fell to arguing. The object of their dispute was the elephant. Now, since each was blind, none had ever seen that mighty beast of whom so many tales are told. So, to satisfy their minds and settle the dispute, they decided to go and seek out an elephant.

Having hired a young guide, Dookiram by name, they set out early one morning in single file along the forest track, each placing his hands on the back of the man in front. It was not long before they came to a forest clearing where a huge bull elephant, quite tame, was standing contemplating his menu for the day.

The six blind men became quite excited; at last they would satisfy their minds. Thus it was that the men took turns to investigate the elephant's shape and form.

As all six men were blind, neither of them could see the whole elephant and approached the elephant from different directions. After encountering the elephant, each man proclaimed in turn:

'O my brothers,' the first man at once cried out, 'it is as sure as I am wise that this elephant is like a great mud wall baked hard in the sun.'

'Now, my brothers,' the second man exclaimed with a cry of dawning recognition, 'I can tell you what shape this elephant is - he is exactly like a spear.'

The others smiled in disbelief.

'Why, dear brothers, do you not see,' said the third man -- 'this elephant is very much like a rope,' he shouted.

'Ha, I thought as much,' the fourth man declared excitedly, 'This elephant much resembles a serpent.'

The others snorted their contempt.

'Good gracious, brothers,' the fifth man called out, 'even a blind man can see what shape the elephant resembles most. Why he's mightily like a fan.'

At last, it was the turn of the sixth old fellow and he proclaimed,

'This sturdy pillar, brothers' mine, feels exactly like the trunk of a great areca palm tree.'

Of course, no one believed him.

Their curiosity satisfied, they all linked hands and followed the guide, Dookiram, back to the village. Once there, seated beneath a waving palm, the six blind men began disputing loud and long. Each now had his own opinion, firmly based on his own experience, of what an elephant is really like. For after all, each had felt the elephant for himself and knew that he was right!

And so indeed he was. For depending on how the elephant is seen, each blind man was partly right, though all were in the wrong.

(Riordan, 1986, pp. 30-33)

[Source: <http://www.cob.sfasu.edu/pstetz/Six-Blind-Men.html> 20030811]