Elephant Whisperers: In Defense of the Gentle Giant

Posted on

Oscar-winning Indian documentary the Elephant Whisperers is a beautiful story woven around a woman and a man and an orphaned baby elephant. It unfolds a bond that eclipses the human-pachyderm conflict into one of healing love and new relationships. It is an ode to the long tradition of coexistence between the two species.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



It’s amazing how animals can tug at our heartstrings. They have eyes that speak and soulful glances that move humans to tears. Images of Raghu, the orphaned elephant separated from its herd and its mother, is the beginning of a tale of triumph that begins with near-death. Raghu epitomizes the plight of these gentle giants and their helplessness, reduced to depending on the mercy of their very

nemesis – the humans.

Sadly, the electric fence is the invincible separation between humans and elephants, the line of conflict, the defense line neither should cross. Raghu's herd did cross. Its mother falls victim to the electric fence, leaving a vulnerable Raghu open to the powerful forces of the wild. When Raghu was found by the wildlife officers of the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, the survival of the injured three-month-old baby elephant was in doubt. They handed over the baby elephant to the care of two humans. Raghu's tragedy brings together Bomman and Bellie, two tribespeople from the Kattunayakan community. Their story unveils a shared passion for an orphaned elephant.

But the couple is not strangers to the wild. They and their ancestors have lived side by side with the wild for centuries and have been elephant carers, assisting in the work of the Theppakadu Elephant Camp. A chance meeting with baby Raghu in 2017 by Kartiki Gonsalves led to her documenting the elephant's journey through five years to record a beautifully woven story about a woman and a man and their elephant, winning the Best Documentary (Short) at this year's Oscars.

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What makes the Elephant Whisperers so unique is its authenticity. The Tamil Nadu landscape is beautiful. There is no exaggeration in the passing misty mountains and the effervescent streams and waterfalls. It is as beautiful as the Sri Lankan landscape where the elephants roam. The people are who they are. Simple folks who have lived off the forests, taking only what they want while protecting it. The beauty is that the protagonists are fiercely loyal people of the wild who understand the vitality of coexistence with the jungle and its inhabitants. Each is dependent on the other. But theirs is a hard life with elephant encroachments and tiger attacks. Bellie lost her husband to a tiger attack.

The narration is straightforward and honest. The documentary is unpretentious because the narrator uses mother-tongue-influenced pronunciation over an

acquired inflection to soothe Western ears. The documentary is candid. What is remarkably visible in the documentary is its rawness. The viewers can watch the characters in their natural surroundings, their well-worn bodies, still solid and willing to work, hardened by years of walking the rough and hard ground, without the pretentious performances for the camera. As a simple yet powerful story that takes the narrative away from the human-elephant conflict, it is a love story wrought out of this very conflict. The antecedent to the story is a mother elephant's death, the surreal revelation of the eventuality of human-elephant conflict. Her orphaned baby brings two people together. Raghu becomes the matchmaker between Bomman and Bellie, who develop a fondness for each other as they care for their baby. One cannot but notice Bellie's playful on-screen banter and sometimes flirtatious, mischievous grin and giggles towards Bomman.

The protagonists teach us valuable lessons in serving with sacrificial love, expecting nothing in return. Bomman and Bellie say that elephants require a lot of love and care like humans, and Raghu's recovery is down to one crucial reason – together, they gave it the feel of a family that allowed him to thrive and come out of its misery. They weep when an adolescent Raghu is removed from their care, an essential step for the wellbeing of any growing elephant. Bellie feels the same intense grief she felt when she lost her daughter. But then they have baby Ammu to care for, although Raghu is not too far away and heeds their call whenever they meet.

Witnessing the simplicity with which Bomman and Bellie dedicated themselves to saving and nurturing Raghu, one realizes what passion is all about – a pursuit bereft of profit and the spotlight. If not for the filmmaker's ability to spot the beauty in this simple story, the world would be poorer in wisdom to understand the importance of balancing human advancement parallel to the needs of nature and its inhabitants. As the protagonists' state, there is a limit to what human carers can teach an elephant. They learn from their kind. The verdict from the documentary was loud and clear – elephants belong in the wild, and their homeland should be protected at all costs.

The two species have coexisted for centuries. In Sri Lanka, like in India, the elephant has historically been integral to religion and culture, and they are still the majestic bearers of religious relics in religious processions. But the unassailable problem is reconciling human advancement with the wellbeing of elephants. Habitat loss driven by urbanization, deforestation, expansion of human settlements and the agriculture economy, and resource scarcity caused by climate change is

exacerbating human-elephant conflict in our countries, with a continuous discourse on the issue with less long-term sustainable outcomes in sight. While coexistence at a distance may work, one impinging on the other's space has brought misery to humans and animals alike. Unlike other animals, the human-elephant relationship is a pendulum of excesses, a contrast between cruelty and kindness, both to the animal's detriment. Farmers use various devices to dissuade elephants from feasting on crops, causing severe injury, suffering, and even slow death. Religion-induced kindness that makes individuals feel good about treating all sentient beings with compassion leading to feeding elephants along roads, does more harm than good, as they invade settlements in search of foods that they become familiar with as they don't find them in their habitat. If human hands cause so much misery for these gentle giants, then the onus lies with humanity to be the solution. Elephants mind themselves, their herd, and their babies. They invade human spaces for a purpose, for their survival. The problem lies with us invading their areas and laying down the terms to an animal that cares not so much for us but for its kind. Their herd and their homeland. At least this story gives hope that it is not a road of no return for elephants. Kudos to Kartiki for expanding her love of the wild by taking Mudumalai to the world and allowing the world to see the beauty amid the complexity of the human-elephant relationship.

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In Elephant Whisperers, the filmmaker has successfully changed the narrative to focus on people that live off the grid, pitted against life's harsh realities but play remarkable roles and record incredible feats that go unnoticed. They don't demand that their stories be told. Protecting and nurturing the wild comes naturally to them. Animal species are the center of that universe, and only mutuality can ensure survival and longevity.

As for Bellie, the woman who once feared the wild when she lost her husband in a tiger attack, this unexpected mission was her road to redemption, giving back her voice, losing the fear of the wild, and becoming the mother that the elephants had lost.

The documentary is recommended not because it won an Oscar but because it will reset our infantile notions about the gentle giant and humanity’s role. After watching Elephant Whisperers, one wonders whether combing wildlife sanctuaries on gas-guzzling jeeps to spot elephants at the waterhole or taking joy in feeding them by the roadside is a conscionable thing.



Bomman and Bellie with Raghu.



Captured amidst beautiful landscapes, it is a powerful story that explains the human-elephant conflict.



A caring and loving moment.





Serene beauty of Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Bomman and Bellie alongside Raghu and Bommi.



Prime Minister at the Theppakadu Elephant Camp in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve.



A proud moment at the Oscars – Kartiki Gonslaves and Guneet Monga receiving the award for best documentary ‘The Elephant Whisperers.



Achin Jain and Guneet Monga, Co-Founders of Sikhya Entertainment with Bellie, Bomman and Kartiki Gonsalves, Director/Executive Producer.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Guneet Monga and Kartiki Gonsalves.