The elephants and I: The Story of a Mahout

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upIn the early hours of the morning Sumanabanda’s father would take his elephants and head off to work. Several miles into his commute on the

back of one of his majestic animals he glances with suspicion over his shoulder. As he suspected his little son stands gleefully behind, breathless from his morning excursion of stealth and pursuit. Shaking his head, he laughingly allows his delighted little son to join him up on the elephant not having the heart to send the little boy alone all the way back. Sumanabanda loved the elephants and nothing could keep him away…

Sumanabanda is now the chief mahout at the Pinnnawela elephant orphanage home to approximately 80 elephants. His renown as a skilled mahout has ex-tended overseas and even earned him the title of chief mahout of Sri Lanka. “Be it the wild, tame, calf, pregnant, or wounded, I can look after it without any difficulty,” he candidly states with a hint of pride. A life dedicated to elephants, his love and enthusiasm for his vocation over decades passing, remain undiminished. Instead it has flourished into a perfected skill and a gift. Handling elephants has been known to many as a life of hard-ship and constant danger, but this slightly built mahout is the picture of lighthearted contentment of a man who is living his dreams. “If you learn the tricks of this trade in its entirety and thoroughly and practice it faithfully and attentively no harm will ever come to you,” says Sumanabanda with confidence adding “throughout my entire life as a mahout an elephant has not so much as hurt a nail on my finger.” Hailing from four generations of mahouts, which include not only his father’s father but also his mother’s father it seemed only natural that Sumanabanda would have his des-tiny spelled out as mahout. His father was his untiring mentor ever ready to answer his inexhaustible string of questions on elephants. It is to this knowledge that Sumanabanda attributes his unfaltering abilities. “We would sit up late into the night discussing the finer details in the art of elephant handling –him chewing his betel leaves while I kept insisting that I wasn’t sleepy.” A knowledge that has been passed down for generations since the time of the kings, Sumanbanda learnt it all faithful to the last letter of the ancient texts handed to him by his father.





Earning the title of a mahout requires an immeasurably long list of know-how. These include the specific language, various knots to tether an elephant, feeding, identifying ailments, medicines, songs and versus, cutting coconut husk for

scrubbing the elephant and the proper uses of the ankus to control the elephant are just a few to skim the surface. “At Pinnawela I don’t use the ankus much now as all the elephants here have formed a connection with me and recognise the command of my voice,” says Sumanabanda.

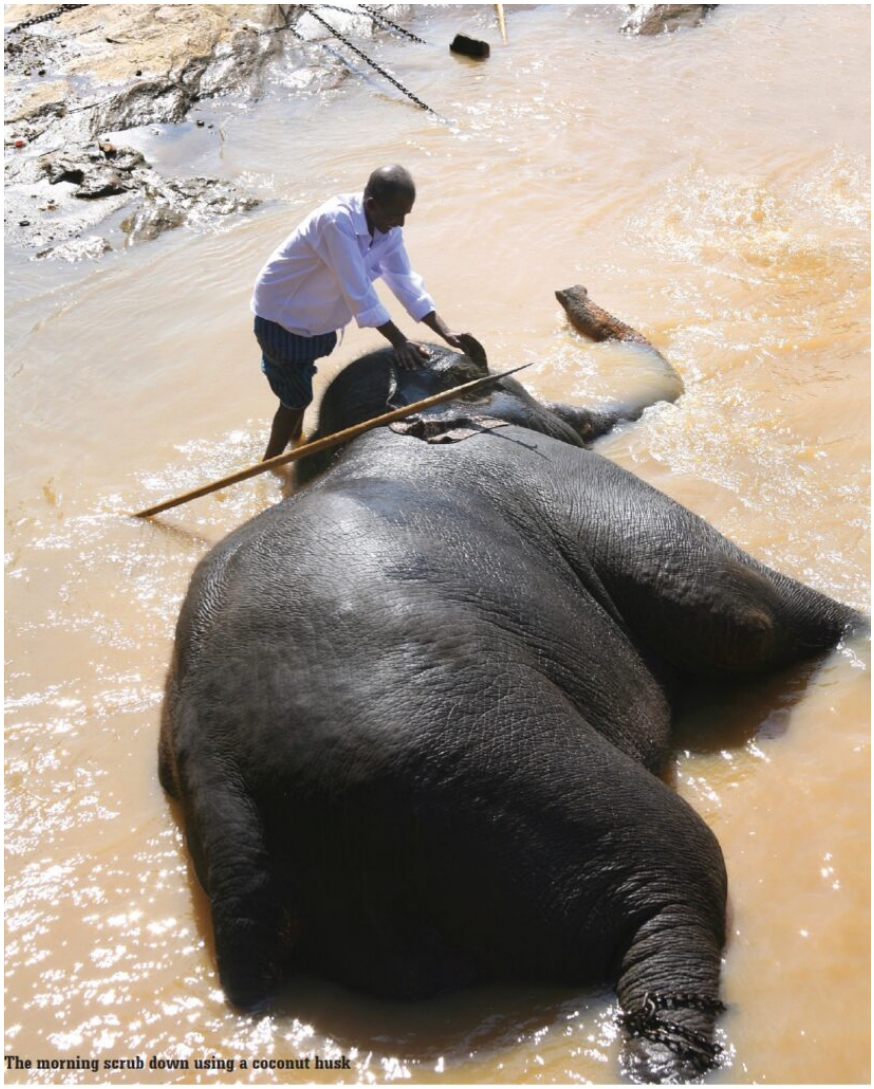
Sumanbanda’s life has revolved around elephants. As a child he would go to school and return home on the back of the elephant. “I knew neither hunger nor weariness when it came to my love of elephants. As a child I would stave off dinner time as long as I could just to remain a while longer with the elephants,” chuckles Sumanabanda. To this day looking after elephants has sustained his livelihood and it is in the very blood that runs in his veins, he states simply.Sumanabanda began his work as an elephant handler first at the Dehiwela Zoo and thereafter at temples, managing the temple elephants, including preparing them for many Perahera pageants. This included the main elephant of the stately Kandy perahera which required a different set of skills for dressing the elephant in elaborate adornments, and preparing the elephant to carry the sacred tooth relic. It was in 1982 that he came to Pin-nawela and felt right at home with the abundance of elephants.

“My experience is diverse which is why I am able to look after any type of elephant,” he says and Pinnawela was a dream come true. It was a dif-ferent environment where a mahout must learn to keep an eye on herds of elephants roaming freely including the untamed brought in from the wild having lost their way.

Sumanabanda was able to put much of his knowledge to test at Pinnawela and it offered many opportunities to learn more. He now trains the many novice mahouts and assigns tasks for each mahout as deemed appropriate. “The task of a mahout is that of great responsibility, we must protect not only the elephant but also ensure that no harm comes to the people and property in the surroundings. I some-times find it easier to manage the elephants than the temperaments of the young mahouts!” he says laughingly. He stresses on constant vigil and the mahouts ability to recognise beforehand that something is amiss from the demeanour or mannerisms of the elephant. “The job must be done to the letter without missing a beat. The lax minute that you enjoy, neglecting to tether an elephant properly is nothing compared to the lifetime of suffering you will bring upon yourself as a consequence of your carelessness,” he says sagely.It is often that many have come knocking upon his door to handle a rogue elephant. He had arrived at the scene of chaos where the elephant of Asgiriya temple in Matale, having turned upon its own

mahout stood unreachable atop the mountain. The frightened villagers had abandoned homes along the mountain out of fear.

Sumanabanda armed with his particular skills and two of his student mahouts, soothed the elephant and escorted it down to safely tether away without incident. “The villagers were so delighted they hoisted me up on their shoulders,” says Sumanabanda. There have been times that Sumanabanda would indulge in his glory moments. He would mount such a rogue elephant and walk it along the roads to safety while singing triumphantly all the way. “These various accomplish-ments bring me great joy. It is an ode to my father, of the skills that I have inherited from him,” he says with great fondness. His successes have never made Sumanabanda complacent. He believes a mahout may endanger his life up to four times a day, and to this day, he doesn’t head off to work without the blessings he receives from his mother and at his father’s grave.


The morning scrub down using a coconut husk

It is only when he thinks of the future of his beloved profession that Sumanabanda's brow furrows. He stresses that it is a skill inherent to the country passed down from generations and must be preserved with pride. "Some come from foreign lands to learn this skill from me, and I have even had the opportunity to travel to China and Pakistan to compare notes on elephant handling," says Sumanabanda of its importance. In the backyard of his home is a shelter that had been built to accommodate an eager student from abroad who wished to live there till he learnt the skills of elephant handling. His welcoming home that has been there for generations is in itself been built with the use of elephants. In the surroundings lie large rocks that had once been hauled by mammoth elephants of yester year. His home **13**and his family welcome elephants from different parts of the country who need shelter and special care or treatment with medicines pre-pared in-house.A

father of four daughters, unconventionally it is his eldest daughter who hopes to take on the reigns as the next mahout in the family. 18 years of age, Chandani, beams much like her father when speaking of elephants and is already adept in many skills. It is she who teaches the many young students the language used to communicate with elephants. Having experienced the many joys of a fulfilling life as a mahout, Sumanabanda has just one dream that remain unrealised and that is to rear and care for his very own elephant!



Sumanabanda with his daughter Chandani who hopes to follow in her father's footsteps