Elephants’ child / Enfant d’éléphants

A letter from a mother to her daughter

Prajna Chowta

"My filly, my little one.... Maybe you will remember the place where we lived when you were a little girl... Maybe you will wonder why we were living in a forest. You've just turned three and are experiencing all of this without knowing how you came to be here and why. It must seem natural to you and I don't know if you wonder about it already but I'm sure that some day you will have questions. Your childhood memories will be filled with huge trees, unfamiliar faces and wild animals and you will want to know who they were, where they lived and how we came to be among them. That is why I am writing to you now before my memories fade and so when you grow up, you can understand what happened, what our life was, and how I felt about it.

Fifteen years before you were born, I decided to give up everything and live in a forest, in India. Having thought a lot about it I know I made this decision because I was not born in my own country. I am Indian but I was born in Africa and lived there as a child. Later, I studied ethnology in London and then in Paris I married a French man, your father, but could find no place really that felt like home. I was in a way rootless. So I set out to rediscover who I was, returning to the roots of my culture in a radical way by spending time with one of the numerous Indian tribes, the Adivasis, the original people.

I was 22 or 23 when I travelled to the great forest of Nagarahole. One morning I saw a tribal boy – I still remember his name, it was Vijaya – and he had long hair, big black eyes and wore pants made of blue canvas. He was washing a young elephant at the bend of a river. The animal was lying on the riverbed and I felt a strong desire to touch it. When I felt the animal move beneath my hands, something happened inside me. For the first time I felt that I was where I was supposed to be and doing what I was supposed to do. I couldn’t explain it at the time and I think really that I have never stopped looking for an explanation without really finding one. Now, I'm sure that there are no words to describe it, but I followed my intuition. While it is all still fresh in my mind, I want to tell

you what happened and why, so that you will understand your own childhood and guess what I cannot put in to words.

After this "revelation" – although that is a grand word for it, let's say "inspiration" – I started to read all the ancient texts on elephants. I found a Sanskrit legend about a wise man Palakapya who they say lived 2,500 years ago somewhere in Bengal and who is mentioned in all the ancient texts about elephants. The legend says that he was born among elephants, ate the same plants, drank the same water, played with their young ones and grew up amongst them as if he were one of them. I thought this legend was probably an elaboration on a true story, that it was a unique example of true freedom and that it could be possible to live like him. The forest tribes are proof of this, but of course it would involve giving up a lot of things, which I was ready to do. At first, my parents and friends all told me it was impossible and they must have thought I was foolish. In their eyes I was going to ruin my life and they must have been shocked and disappointed. It was your father who understood who I was and helped me.

It took me several years and thousands of kilometres to find a place where I could live and adopt two elephants – they had to be females – the two elephants were destined to drag timber, so I bought them in order to give them back their freedom in this forest. I travelled all over India searching in forest regions, down south, then in Bihar, Bengal and Assam, visiting tribes, isolated villages and plantations. I finally found the elephants in Arunachal Pradesh close to the Chinese border and after months of paperwork, it took me thirteen days to transport them by truck. I'll never forget the night we arrived. Strikes and roadblocks were announced for the next day so we drove all night and arrived at dawn. The truck drivers helped me to lead the elephants out and then left and I found myself alone with two enormous creatures that I did not know. Some tribal men and children from the neighbouring settlement came to help me and we led the elephants to the river so that they could drink and we could wash them. Then we cut them some fodder and tied them to a tree.

I went to the nearest village to buy a spade and a pickaxe to make a camp. I put up tents that let in the rain before I got a roof. I employed men to dig a well and had to persuade them to come to work in the forest, as they were scared of the wild animals. I had found this piece of land where we are right now, which is in a completely isolated place. It belonged to a peasant who had grown tired of having his harvest plundered by wild animals, elephants of course, but also deer, wild dogs, panthers and tigers who attacked his crops and livestock. Your father helped me to build a cabin in the forest. It was very basic – a roof with tiles for protection from the monsoon, built on high stilts, and out of reach of wild animals. There were no doors nor windows, no running water or electricity and anyone could enter at any time and share our food sitting on the ground near the fire. There was a mosquito net and some trunks to protect my clothes and books from the rats, that's all. We also built a little barn and a bathroom out of stone with a big copper pot heated by firewood.

A lost world

Very quickly I felt that I was in a lost world with human beings forgotten by the modern world and animals threatened with extinction. Ultimately they all clung to me like a life raft: the tribal people, even those older than me, called me Amma, which means mother. They constantly called on me to solve their everyday problems to share their disappointments and their sorrows. The tribal people are called Jaïnu Kurubas – "Jaïnu means "honey" or "bee" – because they are known to gather honey. They have been here for thousands of years and you can see from their features, dark skin and often-curly hair, how different they are from the rest of the population. They are considered as untouchables and despite centuries of cohabitation, the communities do not mix. That is how they have kept their distinctive features. I realise that I broke a taboo by opening my home to them and letting them share my food. They chose their own plates and cups and did not mix them with mine. In the beginning they did not dare eat in front of me, spoke to me from afar and would not look me in the eyes. This is the heritage of years of

segregation and even though the government has made many efforts to help them, they still carry this burden. I think this is the reason they abuse alcohol and cannabis so much. All tribes take drugs, indeed all societies do, but the Kurubas' excesses are due to depression and the bitter certainty of being excluded. In this fertile ground it didn't take long to find my roots. The reality of Indian rural life quickly became familiar to me and the Kurubas helped me to live in the forest, which for them is the only refuge, the only place they can feel free.

Learning the forest

My first priority was to get to know the forest, to learn how to survive in it and above all to ensure that my elephants learned to adapt to their new life. I had no idea of their lives before knowing them, how they would react to other elephants, wild ones who were used to defending themselves from outside aggression. Nor had I any idea how difficult it would be for my elephants to readapt to life in the wilderness and they had to be watched over day and night. So I employed elephant trainers known as mahouts from the Kuruba tribe to help me but they had never done anything like this before. Since the beginning of time, men have captured elephants and kept them tied up. No one dared to untie them for fear they would run away but that is exactly what I wanted to do. I had an intimate conviction (another intuition) that if I really tamed them, they would go their own way in the forest but would come back home again or at least they would not stray too far as long as they had enough to eat and drink. I had to strike the right balance, which of course would take time, but how much time, I did not know. So we watched over the elephants as they began to explore the forest and after a few days we could not find them. Then every morning we set out to look for them, by trying to follow their tracks, walking further every day for ten days and still we could not find them. I was exhausted, scratched by branches and thorns and my clothes were in shreds. Eventually we located them. They often disappeared after that – I think they needed to explore their new territory.

One night, one of the elephants, Kunti, followed a wild male elephant out of the forest, crossed the river Kaveri and went to a plantation. In the morning the male ran away and Kunti who is very docile, allowed herself to be captured by the plantation owner who chained her to a tree. He called the authorities and some villagers came to inform me. The man wanted money to free Kunti saying that she had destroyed his trees although there was no visible damage. He harassed me but I didn't give in and finally he let her go. I was lucky that he didn't shoot her or try to poison her as so many elephants are killed every year in the region. I began to realise how much the farmers living near the forest feared and hated elephants. I also understood how much my elephants had lost their natural wariness of human beings through living in captivity and I couldn't see how to reverse this.

We had to be more vigilant and when we heard an elephant trumpeting – each one has its own characteristic sound – even in the middle of the night, we went in to the forest with torches to check what was happening. Often it was nothing, just a fright, probably some animal that startled them. It took two years for them to settle down.

One morning before dawn I woke up to the sound of breaking branches and of rumblings near the house and I knew it was our elephants. At daybreak I saw them and just had to call for them to come towards me at the house. They were covered in earth and scratches all over. I rewarded them with bananas since it was the first time they had come back on their own. I knew it would happen again at least from time to time and that our complicity was growing.

When you live long enough with animals you get to know what they are feeling, from their behaviour. This communication is silent and it's always difficult to put into words. I detest the tendency to interpret animal behaviour by comparing it to human feelings. None of the tribal people did that but I remember one day some strangers came to see the elephants and said to me, "It's incredible they are so expressive; if only they could

speak." I thought this was terribly stupid, rather absurd, but replied, "No, even better, they have learned to shut up." There was an uncomfortable silence!

So I never gave my elephants names. When I bought them they already had names on their official papers but no one ever used them. It was the mahouts who gave them names, after some elephants who lived in their village, now dead, and who resembled them in some way. One was Kalpana meaning "imagination" and the other Kunti who was the wife of Pandu and the mother of the Pandavas, the heroes of the Mahabharata. Elephants are ever-present in Indian mythology and they are often given the names of heroes or divinities. They have very good hearing and are surely capable of recognising their name if repeated often enough but I think they respond more to a voice they know. In the beginning when I called Kunti in the forest she would respond immediately with a little high-pitched sound. As she settled into her new life she stopped doing this and I took it as a first sign of independence.

Independence & wild elephants

Our elephants recovered their independence little by little. One morning the mahouts had gone ahead into the forest and they came running back – Kalpana and Kunti were with wild elephants. We approached carefully and climbed up the trees from where we could see them. Our elephants passed by the wild elephants, calmly, and indifferent to our presence. There was no apparent difference between the two except that we could get close to our elephants, as they knew us, whereas the wild ones would have charged or trampled us immediately. However, there was a fundamental difference, and an invisible line that remained as long as we did not disturb their tranquillity. I realised that Kalpana and Kunti could help to reduce this invincible distance, which separated me from the wild elephants. But just how far? These encounters allowed me to get close to wild elephants in a way I could never have imagined – just a few metres away. Being near Kalpana or Kunti, who were naturally not bothered by my presence and so did not alert the others, I was protected and spent hours observing the wild elephants in silence. I began to take photographs and as the encounters became more frequent, I developed a veritable collection of pictures of the wild elephants in this forest.

I could identify them individually, verify details read about in books yet rarely observed, and sometimes never even described. Once a wild female left her baby with our elephants for twenty-four hours and came back again. My mind was filled with questions: what was stopping me from going further? Was it my fear? Could a child in its complete innocence, carefree and unthreatening, get closer to wild elephants without provoking an aggressive reaction? Was it because Palakapya was born among elephants that he could take this final step? Was it because he was wiser or that he had learned to overcome his fear? If I stretched out on the ground and fell asleep would the elephants come to me without harming me? Imagine all those hours spent in the silence of the forest without moving, watching, listening, thinking. Nothing was more precious to me than those timeless moments. Nothing else in life seemed important. My intuition had really got me where I wanted to be, I had stripped away all other desires and attachments, and I could feel whole and transparent.

Before nightfall I had to go back to camp and I would sit watching the flames of the fire and fall asleep peacefully between the earth and the stars, as the Kurubas say.

Kalpana and Kunti were spending more and more time with wild elephants and they went further and further from the camp to follow them. So every day meant more hours of walking to find them. One day with the mahouts, perched in a tree, we found ourselves surrounded by wild elephants and our elephants were among them, all of them quite indifferent to our presence. They didn't move, so it was impossible for us to get down and slip away between them. It began to rain, one of those heavy downpours that heralds the monsoon, we were soaked to the bones and stiff from our uncomfortable positions in the tree. The elephants slowly scattered in the rain and we climbed down. With some dry leaves from a hollow trunk we made a fire to dry ourselves. Night fell and we started

back home with torches already showing signs of diminishing light. In the darkness the paths and familiar landmarks had disappeared or changed appearance. We got lost several times before finding our camp at last, soaked, exhausted and worried that our elephants led on by the wild ones would stray out of the forest again and raise the fury of the farmers.

The next day we went out again at dawn determined to bring back Kalpana and Kunti. There were six of us, including your father. We found their tracks and caught sight of them behind lantana bushes and your father took a step forward, one too many! Right in front of him was a wild female and her young one who was often with them. The female suddenly charged and your father turned and ran but he fell and disappeared among the bushes. I could see what was going to happen and I cried out loud. The female turned and stopped, disoriented. Time stopped. Your father pulled himself out of the bushes and we all ran away. After falling he'd lain in the undergrowth sure that the powerful feet were going to crush him. We probably took too many risks. He had made that final step and had barely escaped with his life. I continued to dream of that final impossible step towards a wild animal. Meanwhile I worried about how to find a balance between the freedom we wanted to give our elephants and protecting them from the attacks of the farmers if they got out of the forest. This dilemma is still with us.

Encounters with wild elephants recurred regularly, wearing down our patience and our energy but we didn't drop our guard again. Eventually we began to discover the marks of tusks on the backs of our elephants – the sign of mating. I took photos of the males they frequented and noted details and dates. One morning a few hundred metres from the camp we found Kalpana and Kunti with two wild males. The older one was huge, his tusks shining in the dark green of the forest and he stood up on his hind legs and mounted Kunti. Over the four years our two elephants had been in the forest, there had been no sign of gestation. However I knew something would happen eventually. I reread textbooks with descriptions of the first signs but there was nothing to see.

One morning Kalpana and Kunti were in the barn where we gave them their supplementary ration of hay and paddy. Kalpana let out a deep rumbling sound as if to catch our attention. It's a kind of sound that elephants make deep in their throat to communicate. There was no apparent cause but she put her trunk on Kunti's mammary glands several times and raised her trunk towards me, again with the same sound. It was an unusual gesture. The elephants often smelt each other's genitals but I'd never seen them doing that to the teats. In fact she did not smell them, she touched them for a moment as if to show them to us. The gestures were brief but I knew she wanted to let us know something and in fact, a short time later, Kunti's mammary glands began to swell – she was pregnant; there was no doubt about it. Eighteen to twenty-two months at the latest – the normal gestation period of an elephant – we would have a baby elephant, the first after five years of work. Kunti's pregnancy awoke something new in me. I thought to myself that she was going to experience something that I did not know and that I could understand intellectually but not fully grasp. If I really wanted to feel what she was going through perhaps I would have to go back on a decision I'd taken years before not to have any children. The reason is still perfectly clear in my mind – all my commitment had gone in to leaving society and I'd always thought a child would oblige me to return. Those who discouraged me from living in the forest would for the same reasons prevent me from bringing up a child here: education, social status, and all those things so important to them, which left me completely indifferent. And then I was living in a country where there were so many children, where overpopulation was a scourge no one could control or educate for. Millions of children destined to be good little consumers but for whom we cannot even preserve the beauty of the world. Why would I force a little being that I would inevitably love to confront this absurd mess? Nevertheless, perhaps I dared to believe I could protect you from these evils, teach you something else, and offer you a refuge? Perhaps I was also inspired by Kunti's courage to face life, to give life, to carry out her role for the survival of an endangered species.

Pregnancies

You were conceived in the forest and I discovered I was pregnant around March 2006 and at about the same time, I noticed that Kalpana was too. So, strangely, the two elephants and I were all pregnant at the same time. I thought they would give birth before me but it was impossible to know exactly when. Months passed. I could feel the foetus moving in Kunti's belly and everything seemed to point to an imminent birth but nothing happened. For some time, I thought there was a link between the lunar cycle and that of birth but I think it was to reduce the stress of waiting. All I knew was that my pregnancy was advancing, although the nine months did seem long to me. Finally you were born first, on the 5th of December 2006.

When I presented you to the elephants, they smelled you with their trunks, showing certain uneasiness before this small thing they did not know. As soon as you could hold up your little head, I took you with me on their back and set you between my thighs holding you with my arms. On the morning of 7th July 2007, the mahouts went to find Kunti in the forest. She had gone further away than usual and they found her three kilometres from the camp and at her feet there was already a little male, whom we called Dharma, like the first legitimate son of Kunti in the Mahabharata, the first of the Pandavas. There had not been a single sign of his arrival although we had been watching Kunti closely the day before.

Counting back the twenty-two months necessary for the gestation of an elephant, I calculated the exact date of the mating and from my photos, identified the father of Dharma, a huge male with impressive tusks whom Dharma will resemble perhaps one day if he lives long enough. Quickly, Dharma began to suckle, not just his mother but also Kalpana whose pregnancy seemed to be coming to an end and who gave him milk even before her own little one was born. But one morning in November 2007 we found Kalpana, and by her feet the body of a small stillborn female. We brought Kalpana home and buried the little one with tears in our eyes. Kalpana immediately turned her maternal instinct to Dharma and took to protecting him like her own, which I think was vital for her.

But since these events, my main concern has been to ensure that you and Dharma thrive and grow up and this thought has overtaken all others. I, who wanted more than anything to be free, now felt responsible.

You and Dharma discovered life together with the needs and priorities which both bring together and differentiate the species: mother's milk (Dharma has tasted mine and you have tasted his mother's milk), sleep, and the discovery of the world around you. Like all elephants Dharma walked as soon as he came in to the world, you had to wait thirteen months. I breast-fed you till you were two and at that age you hardly weighed 10 kilos. Dharma was also fed for two years both by his mother and by Kalpana and maybe thanks to her, now weighs 500 kilos. I realised how much Kunti, his mother, who is smaller than Kalpana, had begun to be exhausted by such a large suckling baby.

Gradually Dharma began to eat grass and plants and you took to imitating him, gathering leaves and flowers to eat. Now you are three, and I observe you both every day. The encounters between you and the Dharma are full of curiosity and ease. You are not conscious of any danger and you get close to him quite unaware that he could charge by instinct. However when you pick up a stick and hold it up to him, he backs away and then comes forward again carefully. Despite the risk there is no aggressiveness; it's all play.

I have the impression that the eternal roles of man and animal have been naturally redrawn. You and Dharma are repeating exactly the same gestures of the first human and the first elephant that came face to face for the first time thousands of years ago. There is no reason to think at first that they would have tried to kill one another. It was only later when in conflict for vital resources that necessity came to dominate tolerance and the natural respect between living beings. There is enough intelligence on both sides for each to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of the other. It's precisely because of this interplay of intelligence that this balance is possible and durable. I often think of the moment when, four or five thousand years ago, a tribal man – or was it a woman? – realised that the Asian elephant could be tamed and that they could serve more noble projects than to be killed simply for their flesh, hide, bones and ivory. The elephant entered human history and at the same time a silent event resonated through history. This capacity to come to terms with different beings is without doubt a sign of the nobleness of humanity. Dharma is designed to live in the forest. You have developed the specifically human faculty of speech. And you have given a name to the elephant – the same for all – Hatha. It is a deformation of the Hindi word 'Hathi' (elephant) Both of you play and imitate adults. Dharma has learned how to use his trunk by playing with tufts of grass and putting it into his mouth. You practise using a spoon and end up using your fingers. The hand and the trunk serve the same purpose. Moreover in Hindi, the word "Hathi" for elephant comes from the word "Haath" for hand. The elephant is the animal with a hand. And you do not say « trunk » for the elephant – you say «hand»!

The Kuruba tribe

It was the mahouts who taught you to speak Hindi and Kannada. I spoke to you in my mother tongue Tulu and also in French but they taught you their own languages and guided your gestures, helping you to walk, jump, eat, relax and sleep. They took you out in the forest, and taught you to know its dangers, to recognise plants and animals. They told you their stories and now you understand their language well. I must tell you about them because, as you will discover if you come back to them some day, they never talk about themselves. The tribal people are really free and they come and go according to their mood and the seasons. They come to the house for work, they are shy when they move in, but they find their place and eventually feel at home as if we were one big family. They stay a few months or a few years and then one day they decide to leave without explanation, for no apparent reason and without regret. They take a few belongings with them or sometimes leave them behind and disappear. If by chance you meet them again, they do not seem the same, as if they had wiped everything from their memory. They make a new life elsewhere, sometimes a better one, but often worse – they may have lost their savings, become drunks, been injured in a fight, lost a beloved or come through an accident or illness. They all have difficult lives because they confront everything with no holds barred, take hard knocks, suffer and sometimes take revenge. Few of them live to be old and each one has his own and often tragic story.

You surely will remember Mania with whom you often played. He would get down on all fours and perfectly imitate an elephant's trumpeting and let you ride on his back. Then he would shake you about and you would grab his hair and shirt to hold onto and the game carried on until you fell over on to the grass. Mania was five or six when I met him and he spent his time playing by the river. He had long hair and a beautiful face but he was very shy. Then at the age of seven or eight, for a small sum of money, he was sent to a rich family in Kerala to be a servant. There are people ready to do this kind of thing for a commission. When I heard about this I was furious and I went to see his mother and told her she did not have the right to do this. She said that it was her husband who sent him and that she was too poor to feed and dress him and to send him to school and that the other family would look after him better. With this kind of reasoning you can justify the most abject things. The tribal people have no sense of time, for them everything is temporary. So, when after a few months Mania had not come back, the mother got worried. I don't know how she paid for it, but one day she took a bus to Kerala to find her son.

When Mania came back to the village he did not speak any more, he had forgotten his mother tongue and was completely closed in on himself. His beautiful long hair had been shaved off – maybe to get rid of lice. I tried to imagine what he might have endured and how he had been treated. So Mania remained solitary and mute. I think his family tried to get him to go to the small local public school, recently set up for the tribal people but he ran away into the forest. He finally turned up at our house, starving, clothes torn, dirty and scratched all over. I did what I could to tame him and look after him. I made him wash, gave him clothes and when he had opened up a bit I explained he should go back to school. He went home and I didn't see him for some time, then he reappeared, and seemed tougher but joyful. He had grown up and wandered through the forest with a bow and arrow with which he killed birds that he then rolled in clay, cooked it in a fire, and ate it. It was he who showed you how to recognise beehives in holes made by woodpeckers in tree trunks and how to get their honey like bears do with a twig. He wanted to work with the elephants but I was afraid something would happen to him and I told him he was too young. So he left. Sometimes an old man from the village would come to take him back to the school. Sometimes we would have no news of Mania for several weeks. Sometimes Mania would just turn up out of nowhere. We give him food and clothes and I try to reason with him that if he goes back to school I'll give him a job as a mahout when he is older. His only response is to disappear again. Where does he sleep? What does he do all day? No one knows.

The tribe's wild parties fuelled by alcohol and cannabis seem to compensate for the rigours of their daily life and the tragedies that befall them. The alcohol sold by some unscrupulous shopkeepers ruins families. The women suffer too as victims of violence. One night a woman came to the house in the middle of the night as her drunken husband had beaten her. She was terrified. "He's going to kill me," she kept repeating. She stayed the night and the next day I drove her with her parents to another village where some of their relatives lived. Some time later, I learned that her husband had killed her in front of her child and sister. The man was arrested. At that time the sister was working in our house during the day and that's how I learned about the event. She was called as a witness to the court and was terrified at the idea of going. She was afraid that her brother-in-law would be released and would take revenge on her, as she was the only eyewitness apart from the child. I tried to reassure her and gave her some money for the bus and her husband went with her. The court found him guilty and she came back a little reassured. For a while she seemed to have regained her lightheartedness and she looked after the house well but then she started to drink. On payday she would disappear with the others and come back two or three days later penniless, exhausted, sick and irritable and then beat her own children. A month's salary wasted on drink! After a night's sleep she would apologise and swear not to do it again. But a few days later, all was forgotten and she would drive her husband (in fact her third husband) crazy by making eyes at another mahout. The husband would get angry and they'd argue all night and so it was until the day they left. They lost two regular salaries and a secure life. She had such a lovely voice as she sang by the fireside at night. Why ruin everything?

Marriage between Kurubas takes place without any ceremony. When a boy and a girl like one another they disappear in to the forest and when they come back it is said they are "married". After one or two children, they separate and go on to find other companions and so on. It's the children who suffer and when they grow up they do the same thing. But the children are also capable of making their parents suffer. Could it be for revenge?

Chikana

Chikana was one of the most impressive figures in the tribe. He had a face like a lynx, curly hair and a nose so wide that some people called him "Three Nose". He was a clever hunter and was afraid of nothing. He was the only one who could locate the tiger's den in the hollows of the big rocks on top of the hills and get close enough to watch the tiger cubs playing together while their mother was stretched out on the warm stone. No one else would dare do that. Chikana inspired respect and had a tribal nobility that is rare today. He was proud, frank and intelligent. He had three daughters, all very dark and very beautiful. One of them, Sanamma, came to work in the house for a few months and that's how I met her father, who dropped by from time to time on his way back from hunting. He was exceptionally gifted with his bow and arrow and in one shot he could strike a bird from the top of a tree. I asked him lots of questions about animals, the forest and the Kuruba legends and I think he felt valued, a little flattered even, and he came back to chat with me. He would talk for a long time with his deep calm voice. One day I couldn't resist the desire to take a photo of him. I asked him and he accepted. I still have the photo, probably all that is left of this man.

Chikana's daughter Sanamma used all her charms to seduce Ayjaz, a Muslim mahout who had worked a long time with Kunti. He was reserved, educated and, I thought, intelligent. He claimed he was unaware of the very obvious advances Sanamma was making to him. I warned him that he could not count on marrying her as his father would beat him and send him away if he learned that his son was sleeping with a tribal woman. As awful as it sounds, I was not exaggerating, I know his father well, and he too is a mahout in another village. He's an honest man with deep-rooted convictions and if he had accepted such a thing, he would have been banished from his community.

A few months later Ayjaz was looking very worried – Sanamma was pregnant. I was devastated. I had even bought condoms for him to avoid a situation I knew would have serious consequences. I said to Ayjaz that he would have to take responsibility for the situation. Either they both accepted to go to the hospital for Sanamma to have an abortion or they would have to confront his family knowing he would never be forgiven. Sanamma refused the abortion, as was her right. Ayjaz withdrew into himself and months went by. He returned occasionally to his village but of course never said anything to his family. Sanamma, out of pride, would not say who was the father of the child. I think she wanted to keep the pressure on Ayjaz so that he would finally give in to her. Then for some perverse reason she came out with an absurd story that everyone believed. She said that her father, the fearless Chikana, had raped her. The rumour spread through the tribe and Chikana was not able to put a stop to it. His wife left him, she married another man and he another woman, but he was broken. I told Ayjaz that he was answerable for his act and that he should tell the truth but he was too afraid. The revenge of the Kurubas is often brutal. One morning, in the height of the monsoon season Chikana hanged himself and was found dead in the forest. I was devastated by the loss of this man, one of the most beautiful characters among the tribal people. She had indirectly killed her father in this abject scheme. I was never able to forgive Ayjaz and Sanamma. She gave birth to a son who I saw once and he was adorable. Ayjaz never looked after him. Did he even give Sanamma part of his salary as I often suggested he should? I don't know. The next year he married a Muslim woman chosen by his own family and they had a child. This story put a strain on our relationship and when one day he said he was leaving, I did not protest. I paid him and said he should leave in the morning.

All these stories fade gradually in people's minds, preoccupied with everyday concerns, but at the smallest opportunity they rise up again and there is always someone to point a

finger and remember the wrongs of one or another. This kind of cruel scheming makes up the social fabric of communities. Sometimes I think I prefer the rules of elephant social life. The females stay together and accept a passing male for as long as they need to mate and then he moves on. The females look after their young and help one another a lot. When a young male is fourteen or fifteen, he leaves but the young females stay with the herd. This matriarchal system has existed for millions of years. It has also existed in some human societies, but the principle of the couple became dominant, even though we know that it does not always work and is often illusory, especially in the most outcast communities.

Immersed in the larger human population with different customs, the tribes have lost their ancestral social system and have not managed to integrate the rules of modern society. I came to understand a terrible thing – you cannot mix the tribal mahouts with Muslims in the same team. It's a terrible admission. We are prisoners of this segregated system, which keeps groups separate without truly resolving the internal conflicts.

Mahouts

For a long time, the teams of mahouts kept changing and never really stabilised, and I began to think I would never find boys who were balanced enough to learn a job and stick to it. At the height of the monsoon season once, I found myself alone with you and three elephants to look after. All the mahouts had left, drunk, quarrelsome or inept. Gradually a new team came together – all Kurubas. I feel strongly that the tribal people must be given priority in all activities concerning the forest and elephants. It is their territory, their know-how and it is difficult for them to integrate in society. As for the new team, it was partly our elephants that chose them. On the one hand, Kalpana had toughened up by living in the forest alongside wild elephants and she had become more difficult to control. She was not aggressive, just very independent. When she would want to leave she would just bolt, unseat the mahout, and run off in to the forest. No one could stop her. She enjoyed her freedom and I wasn't going to contradict her. She managed to discourage about ten boys until Mani arrived. He was a young Kuruba, quick and gentle and paired up with another boy barely eighteen years old called Harisha but whose nickname was Papu meaning "child". They were so thin when they arrived that I wasn't expecting much out of them in looking after Kalpana. With a lot of effort and intelligence, however, they managed to find a way of working with Kalpana, which suited her well. Sanappa and his wife Boji are older. She helps in the house while Sanappa took over from Ayjaz his work with Kunti. Kunti has a totally different nature; she is introverted and very stubborn but quite fragile. She needed a reassuring and gentle mahout to work with her, using seduction and trust, while leaving her a lot of autonomy.

I need only a few minutes to know if a mahout is capable or not –- his way of mounting the animal, his posture, gestures and the way he gives orders –- I can tell immediately. Sanappa who seems a bit absent-minded seems to have all the qualities –- he's patient, hardworking, tough and he loves elephants, which is essential. Over a few weeks, I watched Kunti put on weight and for the first time I saw traces of sweat around her nails which is an infallible sign of good health in an elephant. This new team came together around an event, which took long preparation and caused me much anxiety.

Training Dharma

You probably remember that winter morning when we separated Dharma from his mother Kunti, so that we could start training him. Dharma was almost two and a half and had been fed all that time by both Kunti and Kalpana. He had already become a redoubtable force of nature. He had started to charge and chase anything at sight and vaccinating him had become a complicated affair. I often did the injections myself but Dr Thimmiah, the village vet, is so insistent on treating them that he travels forty kilometres by motorbike with his medical case and required serum. I did not want to deprive him of the pleasure, but he was afraid of the elephants. With our females it is easy enough – they are asked to sit and they stay still for the jab but with Dharma it's another story. At six months it was relatively simple as we just had to hold him, but later he began run away with the needle in his thigh and then turn back threatening to charge the doctor. So he had to be tied between two trees but as he roared and got agitated, so did Kalpana and Kunti, so they too had to be tied up. It was quite a complicated operation for a small injection. So we had to train Dharma or we would lose control of the situation. It was just a question of time before he would trample someone, not out of aggressiveness, but as an elephant plays with whatever he finds amusing, by which the favourite role of a male is to show he is the strongest – a point on which he is rarely wrong except with another male bigger than him. Six months earlier, I had bought a hundred kilos of hemp fibre and I had ropes made by hand. Hemp is light-coloured and soft and when woven across six or seven centimetres it turns out to be a very solid rope, which does not damage the skin. At the end of the monsoon season, we separated Dharma and Kalpana in the forest by attracting him with a banana. We brought him to the camp with his mother and we tied him to a tree. Then we took Kunti deep in to the forest where she wouldn't hear his cries and we left her with Kalpana so that she would not feel so lonely and we watched over them day and night.

Dharma's cries were heart-rending and could be heard kilometres away. It came over him regularly even in the middle of the night and I was so stressed that I could not sleep. The mahouts lit big fires to keep away tigers and panthers that could be attracted by this easy prey. They sat on mats feeding the fire, all the while calming the animal with words and caresses and bringing him tender green shoots. Each morning he was washed and cared for and the ropes were changed to a different foot. On the fourth day, Dharma was calm and could be untied. We began to teach him the basic commands: forward, back, sit, stand, lift a foot and finally to allow someone on his back. The training of an elephant is delicate and decisive for the future. It is essential that all goes well, that the animal is not traumatised, that he accepts to listen, reflect and accepts to cooperate with man. Little by

little he understands what is expected of him and if the mahout knows his job well, in a few weeks all is peaceful again, just as before. I had employed several Kurubas for this operation and the man of the moment turned out to be Rajanna. He was the most patient, committed and the cleverest. He also knew how to sweet-talk you and he too became your favourite. Rajanna is an orphan – in fact not one person working for us at this point has both living parents. Alcohol and the lack of medical care take its toll on all families. So it was Rajanna who first mounted Dharma and as soon as he had enough confidence in him, he took you up too. I don't know if you will remember but you were very proud to ride Dharma. Very quickly you learned the verbal commands used to direct elephants. Rajanna put you on Dharma's back and the two of you went off in to the forest. He brought you back on his shoulders and you would come home radiant. Often you prefer to eat with him and the others sitting on a mat eating little balls of rice with your fingers. You speak to them in their language and they laugh when you use their expressions.

Growing up

You are discovering life with the immense freedom I had desired: a life based on the seasons, the alternation of day and night. You call the moon "Chand Mamou" – Uncle Moon because "moon" is masculine in Hindi, and the flocks of birds which squawk in the trees are all "totos" as thota is a parrot in Hindi. You observe wild animals, gather edible leaves in the forest, bathe in the river and play the timeless games that the tribal children make up – they have never seen the ready-made games of the consumer society. I also let you paint. As soon as you got your first box of watercolours you immediately took the brush and spontaneously spread the paint across the paper, with great freedom and sometimes violence. And you continue to cover pages and pages tirelessly, sitting on the floor of the house looking out towards the forest. For the moment you don't worry about form and I dread the moment when you're going to feel the need to represent something. I think of Picasso who said it took him years to unlearn the figurative and to find the ability to deconstruct his subjects. I wonder if it is in fact possible to avoid this reductive limiting stage – centuries of art history to break away from the rules!

I read books to you – children's books but other things too. I hope you will remember a story I read you often: the one about Palakapya who lived thousands of years ago in a forest among elephants. He was a hermit a sort of wise man. I even made a small book just for you with this story and pictures. Keep it, because this story explains very well – better than I can – the choices that I have made, which are not as simple as they appear. I made the book and illustrated it with Indian miniatures, which are not in the original Sanskrit text. This legend is so old that it has taken on a quite different meaning to what it meant to readers a thousand years ago. Today it strikes me as completely surrealist as I imagine the dismayed face of the King Anga listening to Palakapya who finally consents to tell him about the origin and creation of elephants who could "fly where they liked". I don't think that he could have said such a thing, even at that time, but elephants allow the imagination to take flight and maybe that is what the legend means. Even if some are captured and become "the mount of mortals", this legend along with others has fulfilled its purpose because in India the species has been preserved to the present day, unlike some other countries. It's above all a beautiful story of freedom lost. That's why I love it so much – there's nothing more touching than a lost cause!

Your presence, the question of your future forces to question myself about the reasons for which I chose this life. I'm sure that despite my attempts, I have not really managed to explain it to you. Rest assured, I have not been able to explain it completely to myself either. You yourself will have questions that you'll find hard to answer. Ultimately, I could not live a life that was not full of adventure. Maybe you will understand that when you put yourself in danger, each day takes on a special flavour and it is exactly this that makes us appreciate life. To live this adventure, I needed to get away from the world of men as far as possible. I'm sure that many men and women can find the path of their own adventure within society but I could not. I needed to escape, that was an essential precondition. Others have done the same – heading in to the unknown – unknown lands, unknown peoples, unknown animals. It is not about running away but about conquering

the self, as long as we are capable of self- questioning, letting landscapes, faces and ideas penetrate the self. Each time these impressions get through to my consciousness, I learn a little more about myself.

This life resembles my dreams. I've done my best to share it with you but your dreams will surely be different. Of course all these experiences of your early childhood will have contributed to your sense of the world, but do I have the right to let you grow up far away from the realities of the world and the society of man? Here, how could I give you the kind of education that would allow you to live in the modern world and give you the chance to choose a life that matches your aspirations? You need to go to school and to live like other children. The idea of leaving breaks my heart – I've done everything to be able to live in this forest and for the first time in my life; I feel at home. I know that this is a difficult life and that it doesn't fit in with the educational demands of a child. I feel I have trapped myself, by my desires, the desire for another life, then for you, conflicting desires, which will make us, leave here. I could perhaps extend the deadline, take on a student who could help you to follow correspondence classes but how long would that last? How long would this hypothetical young woman agree to live here? I fear that the utter simplicity of this life, the isolation and a few weeks of monsoon rain deep in the forest would be enough to make her flee.

Sooner or later, I will have to prepare to leave and live somewhere else, in a town where you can go to school where your life will connect with thousands of other children. You will forget the forest, the elephants, and the tribal people. For me, it will be heart-rending but I'm sure I'll find another reason to live. I've probably found it already – it's you. I feel you've become more important than my own life. You, the child whose coming I was truly concerned about, is now for me a new reason to live for. What counts for me now is to be with you. So we will leave, you and I.... and as for the rest, only time will tell....

12 November 2013

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The legend of Palakapya

Prajna Chowta

"The moonlight was shimmering on the waters of the Ganga. By her lapping waters was built an imposing palace, and on the balcony, overlooking the river, was a silhouette crouched in thought: Romapada, king of Anga. He was a powerful and benign ruler, an efficient administrator, regularly checking in disguise on the state of his kingdom's affairs. Campa, his capital, was flourishing in trade and forests all around the kingdom were cleared to make land available for the gentry and peasants. Taxes were collected regularly and the kingdom's coffers were full.

"The night was getting cooler, a light breeze filled the air, and the king looked for the shawl that had fallen from his shoulder. As he picked up the shawl and wrapped it round his shoulders, he felt a prick in his hand. He removed a sharp little grain from the shawl and examined it carefully. It was bamboo rice, which meant that the bamboos had started to flower. From the dawn of time, it was known that the gregarious* flowering of bamboos signified seven years of drought, that the rats would multiply and eat all the grain, and the elephants would go out of the forests to look for fodder in the cultivated fields.

"The news soon reached the last corner of the kingdom, to the east, near the great Lohit River, a tributary of the mighty Brahmaputra. Sages lived there, next to the river and they came to visit the king. His daughter Shanta went to welcome and look after the visiting sages. The king knew that the flowering of bamboos meant hardship and starvation for his people, thus he had to seek the advice of the visiting great sages.

"The next morning, the official priest and the ministers of the court came to see the king with their plea: 'Forests were burnt and cleared away in hectares and in its place was built the dazzling city of Campa, the capital of the kingdom of Anga. The city flourished on the banks of the river Ganga. The population soared and more forests were cleared to make way for agriculture and cattle. The farmers toiled day and night to protect their crops from wild animals. Then, in the forests surrounding this vast kingdom, the bamboos had started to flower in mass, announcing a drought in the kingdom of Anga. The seeds that fell from these flowering bamboos were collected by the people and eaten as rice; rats multiplied with the fallen bamboo rice and gnawed their way through everything they could find**,** and finally the wild elephants started raiding what was left of the crops. O mighty king, we supplicate to you with our solemn plea.'

"The sages of the great river were graciously hosted by King Romapada in Campa and by their grace he earned a boon to catch the elephants that were threatening his people. The visiting sages advised the king of Anga how to capture them using the system of *keddah*. Soldiers were dispatched to every forest near and far in the kingdom to search for the elephants. One batch found a group of elephants near a watering hole, by a small ashram where lived an old sage, Samagayana and his son, Palakapya. The soldiers discovered that Palakapya was accustomed to spending his time with the elephants, morning, noon and night. They sent the information to King Romapada about these elephants that were at a waterhole not far from the ashram and the strange sage who lived with them. The King ordered for the elephants to be captured. The method used was the *keddah*, the far-eastern technique of the country, trapping elephants in their territory. Chased into an enclosure built into a funnel, they were pushed into a circle made of tree trunks. To the accompaniment of continuous loud noises, the elephants, of all sizes, were driven through the opening of the gate, and it was shut by slashing the rope that had held it open. The

elephants were roped by their necks and feet, and then taken out of this wooden cage. Many elephants were sacrificed: mothers tethering their young ones, old bulls or calves running amok. The others were trained to the voice of man and obeyed theirs orders. Then they were taken to the city of Campa, and, with the help of the great sages, the elephants were secured to strong poles.

"When Palakapya came out of his father's ashram, he went to the water hole to check on the elephants and realised that they had disappeared. He started to track them, and after a few days, he arrived at the entrance of a great city. Its streets were busy, and people in colourful robes were moving about gracefully. He followed a crowd of people into a market place where jewels and gold were sold like fruits of the season. The people were whispering and then he heard the word 'elephant'. He walked out into the open air, and at a distance, he saw a beautiful *peepul* tree standing alone near water. He walked towards the swaying leaves of the tree, climbed the tree, and was overwhelmed at the sight of women playing in water and the sounds of tinkling laughter. It was the queen's bath. He started to climb down, to take a closer look.

"He was stopped by soldiers and was escorted through a garden illuminated by lamps in the approaching darkness. He heard roaring, moaning sounds, reverberating into dark forms that took the shape of elephants in wooden kraals; elephants tied to trees, elephants walking around with bells and chains. Palakapya approached the elephants. Everyone stood aside. Gently he caressed the sick ones lying on the ground. He whispered in their ears, blew a cloud of yellow powder on their wounds. They revived and stood up to live again

"Palakapya understood that King Romapada had captured the elephants thanks to the knowledge of the sages on how to trap them and train them to be obedient to man. But he believed that the elephants had to be kept free, for after all they are wild. All observed Palakapya calming the beasts and heard them playing music like trumpets in response to his care. Everyone present was lost in admiration for is it not the forte of man to make a beast sing?

"Then the great sages went to see the king and told him what they had seen. The King immediately went to pay his respects to the hermit, Palakapya. Curious, the king asked, 'What is your name, O honoured one? Who are your ancestors?' Palakapya remained silent. The king then bowed in low homage and Palakapya spoke: 'I was born of a mother who had to abandon me in the forest when I was six months old, as she was a princess whose kingdom's law did not accept a child out of wedlock into her family, even though my father is Sage Samagayana. That is why I grew up among elephants and I can speak to them and they can speak to me. That is how I learnt their story.'

"He continued: 'Formerly elephants could go anywhere they pleased and assume any shape. They roamed as they liked in the sky and on the earth, their moving herds resembling fleeting masses of rain clouds, until one of them rested on a huge banyan tree and broke a branch that fell on the head of an irate hermit who cursed the elephants. Hence you see, the elephants were deprived of the power of moving at will, and came to be vehicles for even mortal men. The elephants of the quarters, however, were not cursed.'

"'The elephants of the quarters, attended by all the elephant tribes, went to Brahma and said: "O God, when our kinsfolk have gone to earth by the power of fate, they may be prey to diseases, because of unsuitable and undigested food due to eating coarse things, overeating, and other causes." Thus addressed by them in their great distress, Brahma replied to them: "Not long after now there shall appear a certain sage fond of elephants, well versed in medicine, and he shall skilfully cure their diseases."'

"'Palakapya was born and he grew with the elephants, played with their young ones, wandering with them through rivers and torrents, on mountain tops and in pools of water,

and on pleasant spots of ground, living as a hermit on leaves and water, thus learning all about the elephants.'

"'Know, King of Anga, that I am that hermit Palakapya, son of Samagayana! By capturing the elephants, you are calling the wrath of god and more grief for your people. If you free them and leave them under my care, I shall take them far away where they will not threaten your people. Then rain will fall and crops will come and peace shall be restored in your kingdom.'

"On hearing Palakapya, who spoke wisely, the King of Anga decided to free the elephants. So Palakapya untied them and when the last rope was dropped to the ground, the rain fell. Palakapya guided the elephants he had freed from the King of Anga. They disappeared in the rain, enveloped by a misty, white, veil."

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Note to the reader: I often speak about the legend of Palakapya, and it has been a particular source of inspiration for me. Palakapya is supposed to have lived in the 5th or 6th century BCE, in the region of Bengal. His story has been transmitted to us through a Sanskrit text called *Matanga-lila*, which is probably a thousand years old, perhaps more. This text was translated into English for the first time in 1931 by an American professor, Franklin Edgerton. Such a very old text is a little enigmatic; that is why I have tried to interpret it in a more accessible way.

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* Note: for this phenomenon, see
https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/bamboo-flowering-14755