

Indigenous Tribals - The Vanguard of Environment – A Close Study of the Oscar-Winning Documentary: *The Elephant Whisperers*

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ABSTRACT

The creative and destructive both the powers lie in the womb of Mother-Nature. None other than the Mother Nature has the power to withstand the onslaughts of industrialization, capitalism, corporate world etc. The Mother-Nature belongs to each one of us. We all are the part and parcel- the children of the Planet. But the vice-versa action of using and giving to the Mother-Earth is apparently and powerfully visible in the life-style, culture and devotion of Indigenous Tribal folks of India's various regions. The proposed research article is an effort to bring into focus the Oscar winning Documentary – The Elephant Whisperers. The research paper aims to explore the perspectives of indigenous tribal people in the conservation of ecology, selflessly devoted to save animals who form the essential backbone of our environment. The short film raises the larger issue around Asian elephants losing their habitat due to climate change and human encroachment. Capturing the cultural diversity awareness, bounteous Mother-Nature of the tiny region of South India, and the sense of responsibility towards the environmental concerns raise the significant sentiment of respecting indigenous tribal folks, animals, and our bio-life. Thus, the research paper is an attempt to signify the documentary as a mouthpiece to highlight the space we share with animals and the tribal wisdom.

Keywords: *Indigenous, Ecology, Mother-Nature, Co-existence, Tribal Folk, Animals, Role of Women, Awareness.*

Making cow dung into cakes for fuel is a common scene visible in rural and urban areas of India, particularly by women. Lifting on her head a bunch of cattle straw or the firewood can be seen all over Indian regions prominently and precisely done by women. Preparing delicious pickles, using age-old home remedies, her quintessential role in farming and rearing cattle is unveiled worldwide. The aspect emerging here is the 'sustainability' signified by the words making, lifting, preparing, using, farming, rearing, etc. Thus, the close proximity of women and ecology provides her with the prowess of benevolence and selfless service for her family

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and children. Thus rightly said by Rudyard Kipling “God could not be everywhere, and therefore he made mothers.”

‘Prithvi’ the ‘Jan-ni’ is our natural mother as it abounds its lap with humans and non-humans. Water, trees, animals, and human beings interact and assimilate with each other on the Mother Nature wherein aptly called the ‘Dharti Mata’. The deep relation between nature and a woman is proclaimed in the above phrase. The power to regenerate (nature) and generate (woman) is evidently sustaining the universe. The Mother Nature echoes the co-existence of all organisms and forms present in its bosom. One breathes, lives, dies, feels, or experiences its survival in the abundant and powerful lap of the Mother Nature.

The GAIA elements can be witnessed impressively and appropriately in Eco-feminism and Literature. The manifestation of women’s pivotal role is inevitably reflected in various genres of literature by Kamla Markandya, Mahashweta Devi, Kiran Desai, Gita Mehta, Kalyani Thakur, Temsula Ao, Subramanya Bharathi to name a few. Maa Durga’s valour on demons, Goddess Amba on Tiger, the Bishnoi community, the Chipko Movement, the cultural and traditional rites and rituals (associated with Nature) mostly performed by women, Padma Shri awarded the “Encyclopedia of Forests” Tulsi Gowda, the environmentalist Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar and Arundhati Roy raising voice for the dispossessed tribals at Sardar Sarovar Dam Project etc. are the few examples of Indian Goddess and women speaking the unspeakable and raising the bars of ecological conservation.

Helmed by Kartiki Gonsalves and Guneet Monga the documentary The Elephant Whisperers is a non-fictional astute presenting Bomman and Bellie the indigenous couple raising orphaned elephants as their own child. The documentary dexterously portrays the lives and routines of the South Indian couple of Mudumalai in Tamil Nadu. The short film showcases the splendid co-existence of South India’s wild areas, the inhabitants, and creatures that dwell there. Bomman and Bellie the central protagonists became the first couple to safely nurture two orphaned elephants in South India. The film presents the relationship between animals and humans, the effects of human development on the environment, and centuries-long instinctive understanding of forest practices still used by indigenous tribal people like the Kattunayakans of the Nilgiris. The documentary excels in establishing the co-existence of nature and man.

One may note here that it is not easy to shoulder the role of nurturers and providers especially in the case of animals. Bomman and Bellie may not have the degree course certificates but they and the indigenous tribes definitely represent ‘ecological literacy’¹. David W. Orr emphasizes that “eco-literacy does not only require mastery of subject matter but the creation

of meaningful connections between head, hands and heart as well”². Here it would not be an exaggeration to mention that Bomman and Bellie from head to heart are engrossed to take care of and provide the longevity of life to the orphaned elephants Raghu and Ammu. The documentary reveals how the indigenous couple creates a deeper empathy for the unspeakable. It is significant to note that human conception of the global community includes non-human life forms and the physical environment as well. The documentary shows the life of the tribal people in harmony with nature. Das opines “The narrative of the short film draws ample parallels between humans and animals”³. The short film makes people aware about how intelligent and gentle, elephants are as they share maximum human traits accept they cannot speak.

The documentary reflects the interdependence of species. Raghu the pachyderm is an orphan but fortunately has human “parents”. Playing together, bathing together, rubbing his tongue, decorating him, feeding him, etc. all became the life-giving chores and vice-versa. Bomman has no one in his family and Bellie too has lost her husband and daughter. It is Raghu who brings close Bomman and Bellie as a married couple and Raghu himself as their beloved kid. A family befriending an animal has the potential to open the human heart and mind to the rest of the living world. Gonsalves avers that her natural inclination is not only for documenting the forests themselves and the wildlife they contain but also the human communities that live within them.

Honorable Prime Minister meeting the benevolent couple is in itself a big positivity for the future generations to comprehend the selfless bond between man, nature, animals, and society. In the documentary Bellie teaching her grand-daughter the methods and manners of dealing with the biggest mammals on the land signifies the significant role of women in the ecological development and sustainability. The documentary reveals that Bellie is the first woman of Mudumalai area who takes care of elephants and has been given the responsibility now by the government officials too. Therefore, one may notice that how significant is a tribal woman’s role in the conservation of environmental ecology. Bellie plays a major role in nursing, feeding, and raising Raghu and Ammu. She shoulders Raghu’s responsibility very well with Bomman. In turn Bellie shares how Raghu wiped her tears when she missed her husband and daughter. This again establishes the inter-species bond which is sacred and lovely. The documentary beautifully presents and significantly awakens the inter-species bond. The debut director Kartiki Gonsalves avers that the documentary “is a hopeful story of respect and co-operation towards animals where co-existence is the way forward”.⁴ To mention here that the love, the

compassion, the awareness towards Mother-Nature and respect for Indigenous tribal people got acclamation for the first time ever in the Indian History of Arts and Cinema bringing home the prestigious Oscar award significantly by two women is in itself a great achievement in demonstrating the powerful role of women in this field too.

The short film highlights the important fact that indigenous tribal folk do use the gifts of Nature only to fulfill their survival needs. They do not destroy the abode of Nature for selfish motifs unlike the so-called bhu-mafias. Bomman and Bellie represent indigenous people's devotion and respect towards Mother-Nature when they share the fact that they do not wear slippers or shoes amidst the lanes of jungles and forests. The Elephant Whisperers is a short film but it has stamped a big global impact. Gonsalves opines that it's the need of the hour to comprehend the important trinity of co-existence (of man and animal living and working together), conservation, and animal culture.

Three years back India witnessed a terrible event in Malappuram, Kerala where a pregnant Elephant passed away after consuming firecracker stuffed pineapple fruit. The pachyderm fell victim to such human cruelty. It was revealed that farmers often scatter such fruits in the area to keep animals like wild boar and pigs away from damaging their crops. But on the other hand animals like elephants are at risk when they stray into human settlements to look for food. Here, one may notice the ill effects of human encroachment and climate change, the danger for wildlife habitats. OP Nammear, a Professor of wildlife at Kerala Agriculture stated that "People are getting into conflicts and they resort to different mitigation methods- they put up electric fences, build trenches or become more brutal and use a crude bomb (to keep the animals away)"⁵. Experts say elephants often raid fields and houses in search of food as forest area continue to shrink due to mining and industrialization which is a sad fact for ecological conservation.

From the above-described incident and facts that bring in negativity, the Oscar-winning short film The Elephant Whisperers is a positive and hopeful showcase. It documents the dire need of animals too which they require from human beings that is care and love. We observe how the orphaned baby elephant Raghu is given to the Indigenous couple to take care of and protect him from falling victim to death as his condition becomes critical after his tail is bitten by stray dogs and thereby the birth of maggots on his whole body. Raghu was not able to stand even. He was in utter pain. It is significant to state here that even the forest officials take the help of the indigenous tribal folks to vanguard the animals in spite of running the rehabilitation camps. Gonsalves compassionately says that the short documentary film aims to "stop seeing the

elephants as the ‘other’ and to start seeing them as one of us”⁶. Thus one may notice that the baby elephant whose mother suffered starvation due to draught and death due to electrocution, survived only due to the selfless love and care given to him by the Indigenous couple Bomman and Bellie.

The documentary is just like a non-fictional essay presented in a didactic form to convey the message and hope. The film opens with birds chirping, flowing streams, and the fresh bright sunlight announcing the fresh mornings amidst the lap of Mother-Nature away from the honking horns, plastic bottles, and garbage litter here and there like those in city areas. The Kattunayakan Indigenous tribal Bomman gazing in satiety at the trees, at creatures eating fruits on trees and sinking his legs in the crystal clear water reflects the holy trinity of Man, Nature and God as displayed in poems of Wordsworth and other poems of Romanticism. The dense forests shown in the film are the natural habitat of the animals like elephants, panthers, bison, chameleons, eagles, owls, peacocks, monkeys etc. The area has been the homeland of Kattunayakans for generations. The Indigenous tribal folk understand the ecology and bio life here very well as depicted in the short film by Kartiki Gonsalves. Away from technology, gadgets and other lavish sophistications, the tribe is truly devoted to serve Mother-Nature with the simplicity of life, natural instincts of responsibility, and the selflessness ingrained. Here it would not be out of course to mention that it is commendable and unconditional care and love of Bomman and Bellie the first couple from South India, Tamil Nadu to rescue successfully two orphaned baby elephants assigned to them by the forest department. In spite of difficulties and hardships, the indigenous couple raises and brings Raghu and Ammu. One can acknowledge that it is not an easy task to be parents of the giant pachyderms. But Bomman and Bellie do not expect any accolades or crowns for their devotedness towards these jungle creatures. It is because they realize the sacred bond with the baby elephants who they refer as emotional, intelligent, and Godsend.

The beginning scene of bathing, rubbing and washing Raghu presents the routine chores between the animal and Bomman. Bomman understands that the animal will not be able to take care of himself. Also, it is noticed that the tribal people still use the *mitti chulhas* in the 21st century saving the natural fuel and other resources. It is observed that Bomman performs the household chores of the kitchen also. It shows that Tribal people never feel shame in performing any household work. They do it with a sense of responsibility.

As presented in the documentary the Indigenous tribal people live the life minimally but in happiness. Here it is important to mention that Bellie suffers a lot of pain in her life losing her

husband and daughter but she keeps smiling all through the events. She is not found as a depressed person thinking of committing suicide. Instead in Raghu and Ammu, she finds solace, love affection, bond, and family. To raise the elephant babies became the aim of her life. When all people lose hope for Raghu's survival, it is Bellie alone who assures that Raghu will survive. In a way, Bellie becomes the 'Yashoda Maiyya' for the elephant babies. When Raghu tugs her clothes and wipes her tears Bellie finds in him her daughter. She expresses in a scene of the short film that while upbringing Raghu, they forget all their worries. Thus the sacred inter-species bond establishes between the Indigenous couple and the bio-life creatures. Bomman and Bellie suitably signify the title of the documentary. They play, talk, understand, scold, hug, feed, decorate, teach, train and spend time with Raghu and Ammu. As human parents fulfill all needs of their children the tribal couple also carries out every duty to nurture and raise Raghu and Ammu. They both have made the whispers a loud to every corner of the universe with the powerful showcase – *The Elephant Whisperers* reflecting the well-being of mother-Nature in its every form. To refer to a Native American Prayer here, will not be out of context.

“Earth teach me quiet - as the grasses are still with new light.
Earth teach me suffering - as old stones suffer with memory.
Earth teach me humility - as blossoms are humble with beginning.
Earth teach me caring - as mothers nurture their young.
Earth teach me courage - as the tree that stands alone.
Earth teach me limitation - as the ant that crawls on ground.
Earth teach me freedom - as the eagle that soars in the sky.
Earth teach me acceptance - as the leaves that die each fall.
Earth teach me renewal - as the seed that rises in the spring.
Earth teach me to forget myself - as melted snow forgets its life.
Earth teach me to remember kindness - as dry fields weep with rain.”⁷

Along with animal conservation the short film bagging the 95th Oscar Award worldwide documents the routine life, experiences, rites and rituals of the Indigenous folk tribe thumping the significant aspect of being in touch with the Mother-Nature. Away from lavish city life, sophistication, and materialism, the Kattunayakans are aware of their ancestry and the role of a mahout. The Kattunayakans is the most forest-dependent tribe in the Nilgiris. Their general philosophy is not harming unnecessarily other creatures of the forest. Kattunayakans view Nature as parents- always giving and giving unconditionally. One finds in the documentary too that Nature is their extended family⁸. The director has presented a culture that is usually not seen in the west. The solid theme of the symbiosis between Nature and man runs constantly in the documentary. Srilekha Mitra rightly connects the above theme. She writes Wordsworth

considers Nature equivalent to God like in the film Bomman asserts his pride being both a priest and a mahout since he considers serving elephants equal to serving Gods as in Hindu Mythology, elephants symbolize Lord Ganesha.⁹ Thus one finds the unexplored life, experiences, and feelings of the indigenous tribe towards Nature through the green lens of the brilliant short film. Bomman and Bellie don't see elephants and Nature as 'other' but as one of them only.

The film opens with the scenic beauty and cinematographic presentation of the Kattunayakan amidst the flowing water, chirping birds, forests, the basking sun and its rays, etc. denoting the life in forests encapsulating the holy trinity of God, Nature, and Man. The dense forests depicted in the film also show the natural habitat of the animals presented like elephants, eagles, owls, panthers, peacocks, bison, monkeys etc. The lifestyle of the tribal folks presents the simplicity of their life in spite of the complexities of the postmodern world all around. The use of the *mitti chulha*, tribal men performing household chores, simple weddings and festivities, etc. signifies the happiness and satisfaction of the tribal folk is picturized. Through the film, it is evident that for Kattunayakans the well-being of the forest is supreme. Walking barefooted in the jungle is their way of showing respect to it. They use natural techniques and methods for their survival amidst Nature. The use of mobile phones is never witnessed among the characters. Still, a kerosene lantern is used is shown. They don't take anything from Nature more than necessary. The tribal couple feels that Raghu is a gift for them sent by God. Bellie says that everything about the elephant is like a human, except that he cannot talk. Raghu wipes Bellie's tears with his trunk when she is in pain for losing her daughter and her husband.

The significant aspect to emphasize the fact that the tribals are the true vanguards of the ecology is that Bellie is the only woman currently assigned to care for baby elephants in Tamil Nadu. Raghu the baby pachyderm whose tail was bitten by stray dogs and his open wounds were infested with maggots, in Bellie he found a mother with whom he also instinctively tugged her clothes. The motherhood of nurturing the elephants which Bellie enjoys, gave her a new identity, a meaning to her life, and a reason to live. Bellie avers in the film, "Everyone now calls me the mother of elephants and that makes me proud." In the film the audience finds Bomman scolding and talking to Raghu about losing the bell in river water just like a parent scolds his son. Bomman acknowledges to the viewers that the orphaned baby pachyderm won't be able to take care of himself if displaced or abandoned. This shows the interdependence of man and animals. Raghu united Bomman and Bellie in the sacred bond of marriage too. Bellie shares that they forget all their miseries and worries while upbringing and raising Raghu.

Spending time with Raghu in the rain, sharing an umbrella as a doting loving father, bathing him, playing and talking with him feeding him with milk, coconut, jaggery, milk, and boiled water they don't want any expensive accolades or lavish houses. Away from the sophistications of city life, their simplicity speaks in decorating the elephants with chalks for religious ceremonies, making loveful touches and gestures as parents touch their children. Bomman is both a priest and a mahout. He states that "seeing an elephant to us is just like seeing Almighty God.

The documentary presents that the forests are being replaced by the scorching heat of summer which also shows the ill effects of climate change on the Earth and animals too. Wild animals roam in search of food and water. Babies often get lost and are left behind. The tribal couple was again assigned a five month old female pachyderm- Ammu. The four became a family. For their marriage ceremony also Bomman and Bellie don't forget to make up first their son Raghu and daughter Ammu. The elephants witness the union of their protectors as if Lord Ganesha is there to bestow His grace and blessings. First, the couple garlanded Raghu and Ammu and then they exchanged the garland with each other. The documentary beautifully paints the picture-perfect family of all four of them returning home.

One of the significant themes running constantly in the film is that of awareness especially in the young generation. Sanjana is Bellie's grand-daughter. Bellie wants to make her learn how to take care of the giant but emotional elephants is in turn an optimistic message for all of us: a tribal girl for future ecological conservation and awareness. The story by Bellie to her grand-daughter manifests that people need to open their eyes and not blindly follow the cruel ways to resolve human-elephant conflict. The documentary highlights that animals reciprocate love when they receive it. At the end of the film, the fact is presented that Nature is benevolent but because of human actions elephants enter into villages. Our mistakes are very harmful both for us and for animals.

The young children washing and rubbing Raghu the elephant shows the positivity of the coming generations. The Kattunayakan tribe wants that young children should learn how to protect and care for animals. Bomman says that he cannot imagine a life without elephants. The ending of the documentary reflects a complete message for the contemporary world how elephants and animals retaliate against the love of humans by showering refreshing water droplets as a symbol of purity and sacredness and bond between man and animals. Bomman and Bellie are the first couple to successfully raise two orphaned elephants in South India. Ammu and Raghu continue to thrive and are now three and seven years old. Bellie combing

Ammu's hair and bomman straightening her hair and then making two ponies intensifies the message of more elephant creations and generations to thrive with help of such devoted and dedicated tribal vanguards.

Thus, the documentary successfully makes one understand naturalism and geo-centrism. It shows that Earth bounds and bonds all of us to realize deeply the selfless love, harmony, co-existence, and care. Amidst the globalization and perils of development, the lifestyle, culture, and naturalism of Indigenous tribes bring home the learning that Mother Earth is the one, around which our life revolves. The sunlight, the serene jungle mornings, the crystal clear water, the creatures, their sounds, and the natural resources bestowed upon us make the world worthwhile to live. The entire planet is home to not just human beings but to myriad species of flora and fauna. The documentary brings in a fresh breeze of hope that how animals are lovable, intelligent, and understanding towards man. The consciousness of environmental concerns can very nicely be learned from the Indigenous communities who do not follow the concept of surplus. The Elephant Whisperers, Raghu, and Ammu, Bomman, and Bellie commemorate and worship harmony with Nature in different forms. Amidst the hustle and bustle of the global world and digital era, Kartiki Gonsalves has beautifully presented the trinity of Nature, Indigenous Tribal folk, and the Pachyderms.

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