



≡LE≡PHANT BLU≡S

a film by
PHILIPPE GAUTIER & PRAJNA CHOWTA

documentary | 90 minutes | HD 16/9

PRESSKIT



IN A FEW WORDS

"My filly, my little one... Maybe you will remember the place where we lived when you were a little girl... Maybe you will ask why we were living in a forest..."



SYNOPSIS

Elephant Blues is the true story of Ojas, a 4 year-old girl who lives in a forest in South India amongst elephants. She owes this childhood to her mother, Prajna, an Indian woman who left behind everything in search of her identity close to the roots of her culture, to live in the forest, with elephants, much like a hermit known in Indian mythology, Palakapya: a story that haunts her. To fulfil this choice in life, Prajna had to escape from a rigid Indian society, renounce a PhD degree in London, give up material comfort and even the idea of having a child... but the birth of Ojas upsets her plans.

Now, Prajna's sole obsession is to pass on to Ojas the values that guided her in her choices. She knows that the environment in which her daughter grows up will mark her imagination and will forge her identity but her duty as a mother also reminds her that she has to prepare her child to confront human society. So, she devotes every instant of her little girl's childhood trying by all means to put off the apprehended moment when they both will have to set out to the very world that Prajna had chosen to leave behind.



INTERVIEW WITH PRAJNA CHOWTA

Tell us about your journey. What fascinated you about elephants and how did you decide this is what you wanted to do? Is this something you always wanted to do?

Prajna Chowta: It is a bit complicated journey... I studied anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. During these studies, I felt the weight of the colonial legacy on the perception, the description of “foreign” cultures by Europeans. I did not recognize my culture in descriptions and analysis by Western anthropologists. For me, it was always the eyes of a stranger, a bit wrong with an insidious attempt to capture the subject intellectually. After that, I needed to return to my roots, and for me, it meant to go and live with tribes in the forest. And I went to live in a tribe in which some men work with elephants. I was fascinated by the complex, intuitive relationship that binds mahouts and elephants in India since at least 4000 years. This is what I looked at first and I learned this craft. And then I realized that what is really interesting in the elephant/man couple is the animal. Elephants provoke deep impressions, emotions, because they are extremely powerful, intelligent and sensitive animals. And once again, the way we look at them remains the look of a stranger who absolutely wants to define the animal in his own terms but is basically incapable to do so. It is better not to say anything, just look and touch. Working as a mahout is a good way to understand them. It takes years. It is something of an initiation. The mahouts are not intellectuals but some manage to understand what is an elephant, although they do not speak about it. They know it cannot be explained.



Where and when were you trained as a mahout? Being a woman, did it raise many eyebrows?

PC: After my masters in 1993, I looked for a forest camp—in Karnataka, at first—where I would be accepted, after a lot of searching and questions asked by the Forest Officers: “What does a young woman like you, who has been educated in England, want to do with the tribal mahouts in Nagarhole National Park?” Their answer took a long time. So, in the mean time I managed to spend a couple of months in another forest camp in Kerala and I was first trained there, and on my return to Bangalore, I was given the permission to continue in Sakrebail camp, near Shimoga. Later on, I tried to go to as many elephant places as I could, including in Bihar, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, even in Burma, to find out the different practices used by the mahouts in various parts of the country. I don’t think anyone had done that with an anthropological approach, at that time. There were hardly any researchers and no tourist at all, therefore no outsiders in those places. Working with elephants was considered exclusively as a man’s job, so of course my presence was seen as a strange thing in the beginning, although I was well accepted because people felt that I was truly devoted to this animal and soon realized I could do the job.



While doing my research about you, I read in some article: “Being a mahout is like being married to the elephant, and this makes it difficult, if not impossible, to have a [human] family.”... Do you agree?

PC: I may have said that in the course of some interview although life proved me wrong. The fact is that living with elephants and mahouts in a forest takes your body and soul. You’re constantly wondering where is your elephant, what he is doing, if anything wrong will happen to him... The living conditions are very basic and there’s not much intimacy. In fact, I lived for years under a tent or a plastic sheet, sometimes sleeping under trucks, or under nothing at all. And night and day I was with the mahouts and the elephants, eating together, living together... These are no conditions for a family life at all... But luckily, my husband got equally interested in the subject, and since he is a filmmaker, we joined our interests and made a number of films on the subject.

Was your family supportive of your choice?

PC: At first, my family did not like what I was doing. I must say I never let anyone interfere with my choices. Later on, when they realized the work I was trying to do, and witnessed the interest it received from many people, and the films we made that went around the world, they were intelligent enough to acknowledge my effort. They probably doubted that my marriage with a foreigner would last, but they saw it did. Now there are happy with their grand daughter who speaks five languages at the age of 5, including Tulu, my mother tongue.



When and how did the idea of setting up Aane Mane come about? Did you face any challenges in setting it up?

PC: Setting up Aane Mane Foundation became necessary when we undertook the project of studying and mapping the migration of wild elephants on the India-Burma border in 2000, for which we received the support from the US Fish & Wildlife Service. We also made a documentary film for Discovery Channel on our first expedition under the title “The Old Elephant Route”. Our projects had already become quite substantial by then so I had no difficulty at all setting up the Foundation. It was much easier than walking 550km along the international border!

What all does the organisation do? What all projects are you currently involved in?

PC: The Old Elephant Route allowed us to survey the international border and map the movements of wild elephants between the two countries; to detect a then unknown smuggling route for wildlife products from Assam and Arunachal to Burma and China, which was later investigated by Project Tiger; and to provide samples for the first comparative DNA analysis of the Asian elephant populations undertaken by the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. It was a difficult project that turned out to be very successful and I received the compliments of some of the Wildlife veterans in the country and abroad. Aane Mane was set up to undertake projects regarding the conservation of the Asian elephant and its habitat, preserve the knowledge and traditions connected to this incredible animal... So the scope is quite large. Since 2002, I have been working on the rehabilitation



of captive elephants to their natural habitat, the training of mahouts, a behavioural study of the elephant, a breeding programme, and we're now testing the first GPS elephant collars designed and made in India by the Centre for Electronic Design and Technology (CEDT) at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, which allows amazing possibilities compared to earlier technologies.

Your book 'Elephant Code Book' spoke about taking care of an elephant. I am personally curious to know: were there many takers for the book, which brings me to a larger question: are we as a population sensitive towards the animal?

PC: One of our recent achievements was the completion of the ELEPHANT CODE BOOK. It was suggested to me and supported by some of the best elephant experts in the country, as it was high time to write an updated and accessible manual on the management of elephants in captivity. The subject has become a very sensitive issue. The Central Zoo Authority has decided the release of zoo and circus elephants to their natural habitat in 2009. The 2010 Elephant Task Force committee report advises the phasing out of temple elephants in the years to come and various animal welfare organizations are fighting against the critical conditions of many captive elephants in our country. Therefore, there are many people who are interested in this book that incorporates the best information from both India's traditional methods and approaches to elephant care as well as those derived from modern, scientific, humane elephant management systems. Forest Departments in several states have ordered the book by dozens, various NGOs are using it for their field workshops, and we have received orders from Belgium, Germany, France, South-Africa...



In fact, the first edition is already exhausted. I also published a version in Kannada, which is historically the first ever in this language and now distributed in all elephant camps in the State. The issue with such kind of books is not much the number of readers, but rather to reach the right stakeholders so that the situation may evolve in the field, although I was surprised to see that many people who are not directly working with elephants wanted to buy the book and get practical information on the subject. Yes, many people are interested in elephants, and it should be reminded that at all times since at least Chandragupta Maurya—except during the British period—the species has always been protected, respected and worshipped in our culture.



CREDITS

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Prajna Chowta

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Edited by

Giuliano Papacchioli

Sound designer

Jean Mallet

Video post-production

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Original Music

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Tony Das

Production

24 images
Farid Rezkallah

With the participation of

France Télévisions
France 5

Centre National
de la Cinématographie
et de l'image animée

Aane Mane Foundation



PRAJNA CHOWTA, CO-WRITER

Prajna Chowta was born in 1970 at Accra in Ghana where she spent her childhood. After a few years of boarding school in Bangalore, she went to London University to study ethnology and art history at the School of Oriental and African studies. In 1994, after a Master's degree, she decided to return to India and spent several years living with tribes in various regions of the country. It was then that she discovered the tradition of capturing and taming elephants.

In 2000 and 2001, she created the Aane Mane (Elephant Home) Foundation and leads research on the migration of wild elephants between Burma and India as part of a project supported by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. In 2002, she reintroduced captive elephants into a reserve in Karnataka with the support of the Ministry of Environment and the Forest Department to study their re-adaptation to a wild environment. She also trains young tribal men to work with elephants, modernising traditional techniques by taking into account recent scientific discoveries in order to design a new method for the management of captive elephants in their natural habitat.

She has published the "Elephant Code Book" (2010) on elephant management in captivity with the support of the Indian Institute of Science (Department of Ecology, Bangalore) and the Ministry of Environment (New Delhi). The book is published by ANCF (Asian Nature Conservation Foundation, Bangalore) (www.aanemane.org)



PHILIPPE GAUTIER, DIRECTOR

Philippe Gautier was born in Brittany, France, in 1960. He was assistant director from 1978 to 1995 on numerous feature films, documentaries, ad films, etc... in Europe, USA, Canada, Mexico, Egypt, Morocco, Israel, Turkey and Russia.

In 1993, he assisted John Boorman on a production in India. He gradually settled there, writing and directing fiction and documentary films for European and American production houses. He thus acquired a good experience of shooting across the sub-continent and is regularly called upon as a consultant on various western productions shot in India.

Noted films:

HATHI

Fiction | 95 minutes | 1998 | Les Productions La Fête (Canada)

Distribution: Gébéka Films

Theatrical release: September 2000

THE OLD ELEPHANT ROUTE

Documentary | 52 minutes | 2000 | Les Films d'Ici, GA&A Productions (Italy)

TV Broadcasting: Discovery Channel (USA), ABC TV (Australia), Tele Piu (Italy), France 5

ELEPHAS MAXIMUS

Documentary | 3x52 minutes | 2004 | Les Films d'Ici, 24 images

TV Broadcasting: Arte, TV5 Monde

PONDICHERRY

Documentary | 52 minutes | 2006 | with Serge Moati | Image & Compagnie

TV Broadcasting: France 5



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