



H. Abdulali Taxonomist, Naturalist & Builder

Hornbill House, the headquarters of BNHS in Mumbai, stands testimony to the stellar contribution of Humayun Abdulali. As Honorary Secretary (1950–1962), he negotiated with the State Government to provide suitable premises for the precious heritage collections remaining with the Society, that were till then housed in the former Honorary Secretary H.M. Phipson's building at Forbes Street in Fort area. His persistence paid off and the new building adjoining the Museum was inaugurated on 13th March, 1965.

Born in Kobe, Japan, in 1914, Humayun Abdulali first came to Bombay in 1924. The son of an importer of raw cotton and safety matches, Abdulali completed his education at St. Xavier's High School. At a very young age, he became interested in natural history, and accompanied his ornithologist cousin Sálim Ali on several field excursions and for hunts that took him to various corners of India. Abdulali joined the BNHS as a member in 1931. He was elected to the Executive Committee in 1942. In 1950, he became the

Honorary Secretary of the Society, and his 14-year tenure determined the direction in which the Society would traverse independent India.

With regard to ornithology, unlike Sálim Ali, whose work was field-oriented, Abdulali focused largely on collections and taxonomy. When he joined, the collections at

BNHS were yet to be examined as a whole, as each lot used to be sent to the British Museum in London for identification and returned separately. Abdulali re-examined the entire collection, and in the course of taxonomic rearrangement, he found several new subspecies. He described 17 and proposed reassignment for two. From 1968 to 1996, he published the 'Catalogue of the Birds in the Collection of the Bombay Natural History Society' in 37 parts in *JBNHS*. When he passed away in 2001, the Catalogue was almost complete; it was finalized soon after. While working on the collections, Humayun Abdulali also realized that there was a complete lack of ornithological material from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and took it upon himself to visit the area for bird material through eight trips from 1963–1977. Several specimens of birds were added to the collection including pitta, pigeon, and owl species that were peculiar to the island archipelago. Species



Humayun Abdulali was instrumental in procuring the Hornbill House building for the Society at a token rent of Re. 1/- per annum; this is his enduring legacy to the Society



Abdulali at work in camp, 1959



With Mrs. Indira Gandhi in Delhi, 1969, at a meeting of the Indian Board for Wildlife

of bats, and a fair number of frogs, toads, lizards, snakes, flying foxes, and skinks were also collected during these trips.

Throughout his lifetime, Abdulali published a prodigious number of scientific papers and notes, and especially made his mark in the field of bird taxonomy. The very first year he joined BNHS, Abdulali published a note in the *Journal* titled 'Eleven Koel eggs in a Crow's nest' [1931, Vol. 35(2)]. In all, he published 356 notes,

270 scientific papers which covered birds, snakes, frogs, and other fauna, and wrote 50 book reviews. Humayun's publication record is phenomenal in its precision and has stood the test of time. His papers record a range of ecological and behavioural observations such as the diet and foraging of diverse species like flamingos and harriers, distribution and habits of the batrachian *Ichthyophis glutinosus* Linn. [Vol. 52(3)], and insect-bird associations with nests of large ants [*Oecophylla smaragdina*

(Fabricius)] Vol. 57(2). Not only did he correct several misidentifications of the past, but he also referred the reader to appropriate literature, provided measurements of each specimen in the collection, noted aberrant individuals, drew attention to instances in which the variation did not seem to match the accepted range in taxonomy and often confirmed the validity of the subspecies.

Soon after Independence, poaching had become rampant, and the few existing laws to prevent illegal hunting were not adequate. Sensing this lacuna, the Director of Parks and Gardens requested the Society to draft a new bill to prevent poaching. It was Abdulali, as Honorary Secretary of the BNHS, who drafted the new bill with the assistance and advice of forest officers and experienced hunters. This bill finally got approved by both the houses of legislature and thus the Bombay Wild Birds and Wild Animals Protection Act 1951 was passed in 1953, the basis for the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. Another significant conservation achievement was in successfully persuading the Government of India to ban the export of frog legs in 1985, an industry that threatened to decimate the Indian Bullfrog. In an elaborate



Humayun Abdulali obtained a standing grant from the Maharashtra State Government for the housing and upkeep of the specimens in the Collection, which now numbers approximately 1,20,000 specimens



ABHIJIT MALEKAR

In 1975, Abdulali filed a petition in the High Court and stayed the construction of a highway through Sanjay Gandhi National Park. Owing to his continuous efforts, the Park was declared as a National Park. The Park is situated in the busiest location of the financial powerhouse of India – Mumbai

article 'On the export of frog legs from India' [*JBNHS* 1985 Vol. 82(2): 347–375], Abdulali not only wrote about how the business is ecologically and economically unjustified but also of the cruelty attached to it. Yet another was his role in getting the forests in northern Mumbai declared as the

Sanjay Gandhi National Park (earlier known as the Borivali National Park). The creation of the Park and its survival through its first two decades was largely due to the vision and efforts of Humayun Abdulali. He was familiar with this area since his school days and his frequent trips

to the site over the years laid the foundation for his 6-part series in the *JBNHS* on 'The Birds of Bombay and Salsette', co-authored by Sálím Ali and published between 1936 and 1938. As Honorary Secretary of the BNHS, Abdulali proposed the declaration of this area as a National Park, and after continuous efforts, the Park was born. Now covering an area of 103.84 sq. km, it is the lung space of the city of Mumbai.

Overall, Humayun Abdulali made many lasting contributions to the country's ornithology and wildlife and more specifically, to the conservation movement in India. Outspoken as he was, he locked horns with Sálím Ali and others on issues concerning the Society and its research focus, and was misunderstood on several occasions. However, none could fail to appreciate his contributions to natural history and to the Society. To quote J.C. Daniel [*Humayun Abdulali JBNHS* Vol. 100(3): 254] "He was, above all, a person of impeccable integrity, a character which he and Sálím Ali bequeathed to the Society. ■



"Humayun's report on the export of frogs' legs was examined in 1979 by a Parliamentary Committee, which called on Dr. Sálím Ali, then a Member of the Rajya Sabha, as an expert witness. He was asked whether it was feasible to implement a possible ban on export, to which he replied that certainly lack of implementation was the weakest point of all legislation for protection of wildlife, but that did not mean that we should not have the Act, but rather that we should try to have the machinery for implementation. Other experts had claimed that frogs and toads had only a marginal effect on agricultural pests, but Dr. Sálím Ali

pointed out that no proper ecological study had been carried out to prove this, and that even if it were so frogs were one among several biological factors which, acting together, had a great influence. Evidently he was convincing, since the Committee ultimately recommended the ban."

... Quoted from: HUMAYUN ABDULALI – NATURALIST