

Zafar Rashid Futehally (19th March 1920 – 11th August 2013) completed his education in Economics and Political Science from St. Xavier's College, Bombay. In 1944, he was introduced to the BNHS by Sálím Ali, who was his distant cousin. He was selected to the Executive Committee in 1962, subsequently serving as the Honorary Secretary till 1973. In the 1950s, a poorly-written newspaper article on the Indian Magpie-Robin in the *Times of India* newspaper received the ire of Sálím Ali. The editor then asked Sálím Ali if he could suggest someone to write for the newspaper on birds. Zafar Futehally took the initiative and started a column called *Birdwatcher's Diary* which ran for thirty years! This also led to radio shows which became quite popular.

In 1973, he moved to a farm house in Bangalore where he mostly lived, barring a few years in Kodaikanal, and finally returned to his ancestral home in Kihim. He started a popular bulletin for amateur birdwatchers to communicate their observations, called the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*, which was published as cyclostyled copies from Bombay in 1959 and

later printed from Bangalore in 1973. With this, he created and sustained a nationwide virtual community for birdwatchers. The interest that readers showed in the *Newsletter* resulted in greater appreciation of nature. Due to differences in the editorial board, the newsletter split into two in 2004: *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* and *Indian Birds*. Futehally himself was a brilliant writer and his articles were highly professional. He also edited and

published an anthology of writings by Indian birdwatchers, *INDIA THROUGH ITS BIRDS*, published by Dronequill in 2007. In 2014, his memoirs were posthumously published as a book *THE SONG OF THE MAGPIE ROBIN* by Rupa Publications.

Futehally was active in the conservation movement. Under his leadership, BNHS upscaled its role as a conservation-oriented organization. Futehally was able to get the Society's conservation recommendations on



Z.R. Futehally The Gentleman Birder



Zafar Futehally at work in 1962: bird ringing (L); releasing a bird from a mist net (R)



Zafar Futehally with C.M. Choudhury, Terai, UP in 1968

developmental project implemented, mainly by persuading the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi of their validity and importance. His letters to the government helped in the establishment of the Karnala Bird Sanctuary in 1968, which would have otherwise been lost to industrial development. He served as a member of the National Committee for Environment Planning, and along with M. Krishnan, was appointed as a 'non official' member of the Steering Committee of Project Tiger when it was launched in 1973. He supported S. Dillon Ripley and the Smithsonian Institution for a project proposed to radio-collar and study tigers in India, despite resistance from some

voices. Futehally was a member of the committee that was set up to study the impact of a dam on the Kuntipuzha river which threatened to destroy the forests of the Silent Valley region, an area which was ultimately notified as Silent Valley National Park in 1980. He was a co-founder of The Bangalore Environment Trust in 1987 that worked towards the conservation of lakes and trees in and around Bangalore. He was also closely involved with the International Ornithological Congress. He helped to organize IUCN meetings in New Delhi and became its Executive Member in 1966 and Vice President in 1969.

Zafar Futehally's honours included the Padma Shri in 1970,

Order of the Golden Ark in 1980, and the Karnataka Rajyostava Award in 1983. In 1997, BNHS conferred on him the Sálím Ali International Award for Nature Conservation in recognition of his efforts towards the conservation of Karnala Wildlife Sanctuary and Borivali National Park in Mumbai. It would be befitting to add an excerpt from 'Paradise Flycatcher' by the poet Nissim Ezekiel, who was inspired to write it after reading Zafar Futehally:

*White streamers moving
briskly on the green*

Casuarina, rouse the sleepy watcher

From a dream of rarest birds

To this reality. A grating sound

Is all the language of the bird,

Spelling death to flies and moths

Who go this way to Paradise.

Futehally was a great source of encouragement to younger amateur naturalists and professional scientists. Madhav Gadgil, the well-known ecologist, wrote in his memorial of Zafar Futehally in *Current Science* (Vol. 105: 9) "When I wrote what was the first ever scientific paper on sacred groves the staid editors of the *Journal of Bombay Natural History Society* refused to publish it. Zafar, then the Honorary Secretary of the Society, intervened and saw to it that the paper was accepted. By now sacred groves has become an established field of scientific research, and Zafar's timely intervention, with his broader outlook has played a valuable role in taking it forward."

Zafar Futehally lived in a bygone age when the world was less crowded and busy. He had a love for open spaces, which was why he left Mumbai to live in a farmhouse at the outskirts of Bangalore. Other than birds, he loved horses and was an excellent rider. He was a thorough gentleman, cultured, had a large circle of friends, and was devoid of prejudices. And to cap it all, he was a birder – the Gentleman Birder! ■



PARVEEN SHAIKH

Futehally's efforts resulted in the establishment of Karnala Bird Sanctuary, which saved it from being lost to industrial development