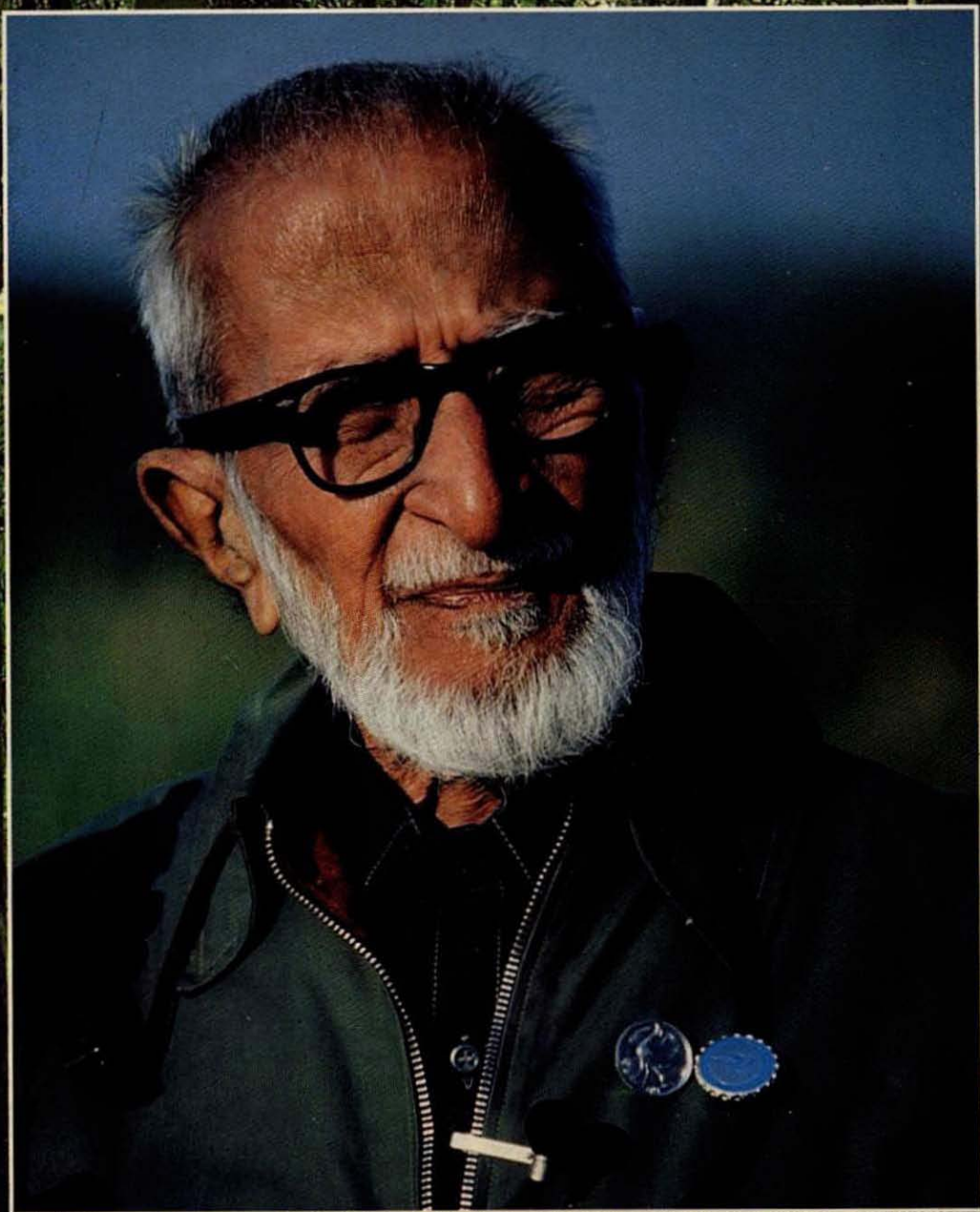


# HORNBILL

1995, No. 4



BOMBAY NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

# IN THIS ISSUE

## ...and other articles



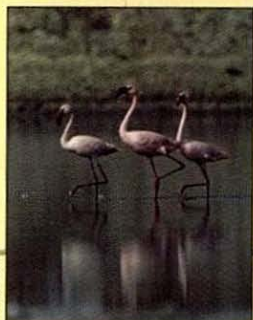
### Memories of Golden Days

— Dilnavaz Variava

The Silent Valley stands testimony to a fruitful association that transcended an age difference of 50 years.

2

12. **His Legacy to India**  
— J.S. Serrao
18. **Birding with Sálim Ali**  
— Lavkumar Khacher
22. **Newsline**
26. **The Empee Saar in Andhra**  
— Bharat Bhushan
31. **Memories of Sálim Ali**  
— D.N. Mathew
32. **Bird walks with Sálim Ali**  
— R. Kannan
34. **Sálim Ali — A Tribute**  
— J. C. Daniel
38. **Sálim Ali — A Guide to Remember**  
— S.A. Hussain
45. **The pen of Sálim Ali**  
— Extracts from his writings

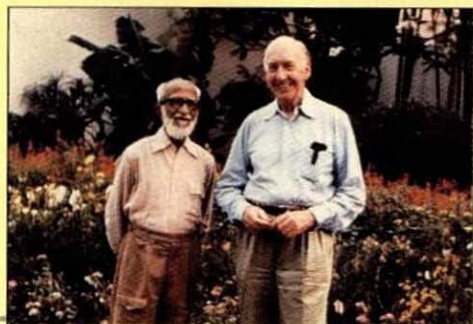


### Sálim Ali and the Birds of Kutch

— M.K. Himmatsinhji

Though the scenario is grim, one hopes better days will be ushered in Kutch with timely conservation measures.

8



### A Lifetime of Association

— S. Dillon Ripley

A long-time friendship with shared goals — based on mutual respect — that lasted from 1943 to Dr. Sálim Ali's demise in 1987.

14



### In Camp with Sálim Ali

— Zafar Futehally

In many ways, being with Sálim Ali in camp was an education in itself — it was one of the best experiences one could have had.

42

The Society was founded in 1883 for the purpose of exchanging notes and observations on zoology and exhibiting interesting specimens of animal life. Its funds are devoted to the study of natural history in the Oriental region, and for nature conservation. Individual membership can be either in personal or official capacity. Membership is also open to scientific and educational associations and institutions as well as companies.

Ordinary members get *Hornbill* free, and can subscribe to the Journal of the BNHS (now in its 92nd volume) at concessional rates. Entrance fee Rs. 50. Membership fees and annual subscriptions. Ordinary, individual Rs. 150. Life Rs. 3,000 (Rs. 5,000 with Journal). Institutional Rs. 1,000. Student Membership Rs. 75.

For more information on the Society and its activities, write to The Honorary Secretary, Bombay, Natural History Society, Dr. Salim Ali Chowk, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Bombay 400 023. Tel.: 2843869, 2843421 Fax:(91-22)2837615.

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**HORNBILL**

1995 (4)

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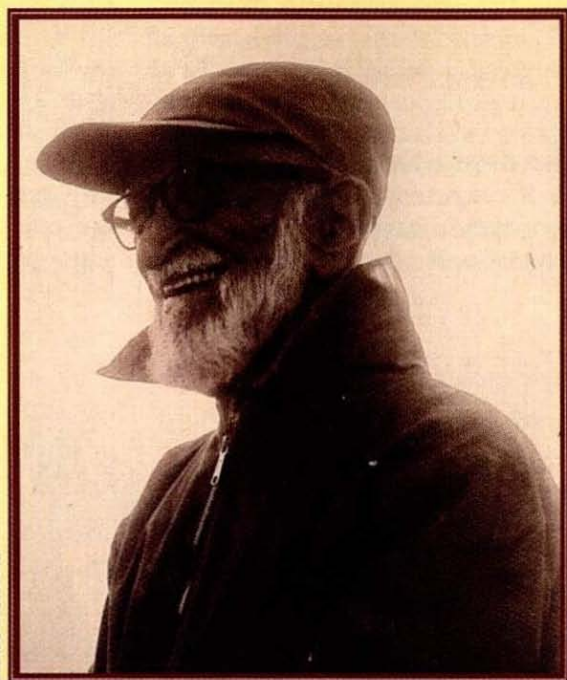
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Dr. Sálím Ali

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**In Memoriam**

BHALU MONDHE

Superlatives were heaped upon Dr. Sálím Ali that are impossible to enumerate on this single page. Honours rested lightly on his shoulders and with the years came numerous national and international awards and fame that he finally learnt to take in his stride. This year we celebrate his Birth Centenary and dedicate to him this special issue of *Hornbill* magazine which was originally launched to felicitate him on his 80th birthday.

The response to our request for material was overwhelming — we will have to keep much of it for subsequent issues. However, the composite picture that emerges reveals many facets of his unique personality — a lifetime dedicated to the study of birds, a fine teacher, an exacting critic and beloved friend, a mentor for several generations of nature lovers and biologists and a father figure for BNHS, the institution that he nurtured and to which he gave of himself completely.

The *Hornbill*, which has completed a long and sometimes arduous journey of almost twenty years, has changed vastly in colour and appearance, but we have always kept in mind the prime motive behind its publication — to promote a love and understanding of natural history and nature conservation — to fulfill the vision of that grand old man of Indian Ornithology with whom we have had the privilege to be associated.

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# Memories of Golden Days

Dilnavaz Variava

As one watches the mayhem around one — the denotification of sanctuaries, the privatisation of community resources, the use of dubious means to achieve dubious ends — one feels a sense of

My professional association with Sálím Ali started in 1973, when I was Chief Executive of WWF-India — then located in a 50 sq. m. corner of what is now the BNHS library. It developed very quickly into a warm friendship. Despite an age difference of 50 years, I never felt a generation gap — and his signing his little missives ‘Sálím’

*As one watches the mayhem around — the denotification of sanctuaries, the privatisation of community resources, the use of dubious means to achieve dubious ends — one feels a sense of nostalgia for the Golden Age of Sálím Ali!*

*A time when certain values were respected and when a letter from Sálím Ali to the Prime Minister could set in motion the creation of a sanctuary or the halting of an ill-conceived project.*



Scarlet minivet

nostalgia for the Golden Age of Sálím Ali! A time when certain values were respected and when a letter from Sálím Ali to the Prime Minister could start the creation of a sanctuary or halt an ill-conceived project.

instead of the more formal ‘Sálím Ali’ set the tone of the relationship from the beginning. I needed all the background I could get on the conservation issues that landed on my table — Sálím Ali and J. C. Daniel, Serrao and others at

the BNHS were always ready to provide it. On his part, Sálím was always appreciative of any management advice I could give — and eager that I join the Executive Committee of the BNHS. I did so only after resigning from the WWF in 1978, to avoid any apprehensions of conflict of interest.

It was after 1978 that Sálím Ali and I had ample opportunity for interaction. We frequently met in the Hon. Secretary's room to discuss some issue of conservation that concerned BNHS.

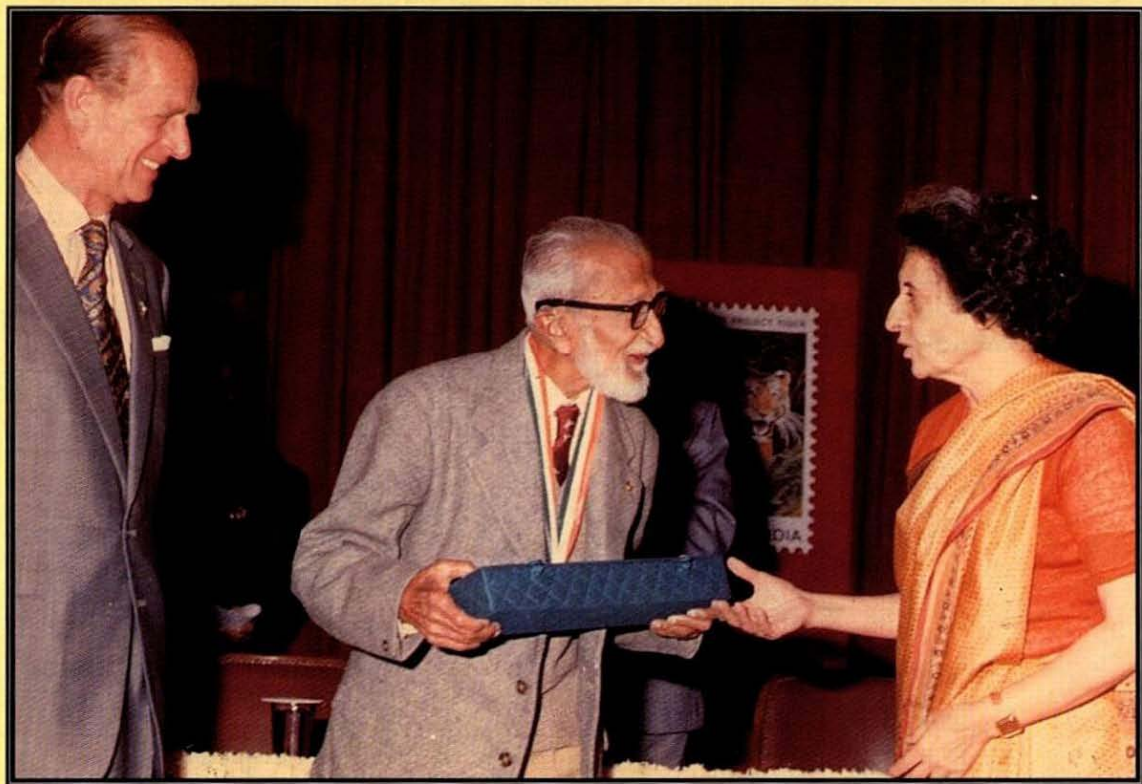
of his approach to conservation. The opportunities to know his mind and values continued also in more pleasant settings — while birdwatching in Borivli National Park and, best of all, on delightful trips to the wilds. Sálím liked nothing better than to get away, and I accepted as many such invitations as I could, because there was always a lot to learn, to wonder at, and to laugh about, on such trips.

In retrospect, I am surprised at how much physical stamina Sálím had even in his 80s. We

*The fairy bluebird  
and the scarlet minivet  
are just two of the magnificent  
diversity  
of birds that have been  
saved from destruction  
in the Silent Valley.  
One wonders how many more  
areas might  
have been saved if  
Sálím Ali had been as  
tenaciously drawn into  
other campaigns.  
Silent Valley was a truly  
untouched area  
and he was willing to lend his  
weight to the  
campaign, and to  
speak out for us  
repeatedly.*

Then, when I plunged into the Silent Valley controversy as Hon. Co-ordinator of the Save Silent Valley Committee in Bombay, there were intense discussions, and trips to Delhi to meet the Prime Minister. These provided a case study

went for a camp in Hiñgolgadh, where Sálím climbed up a small wall to take a photograph, and fell and injured his back. Despite his chronic back pain, his love of nature was so great that he ignored pain and discomfort to immerse himself



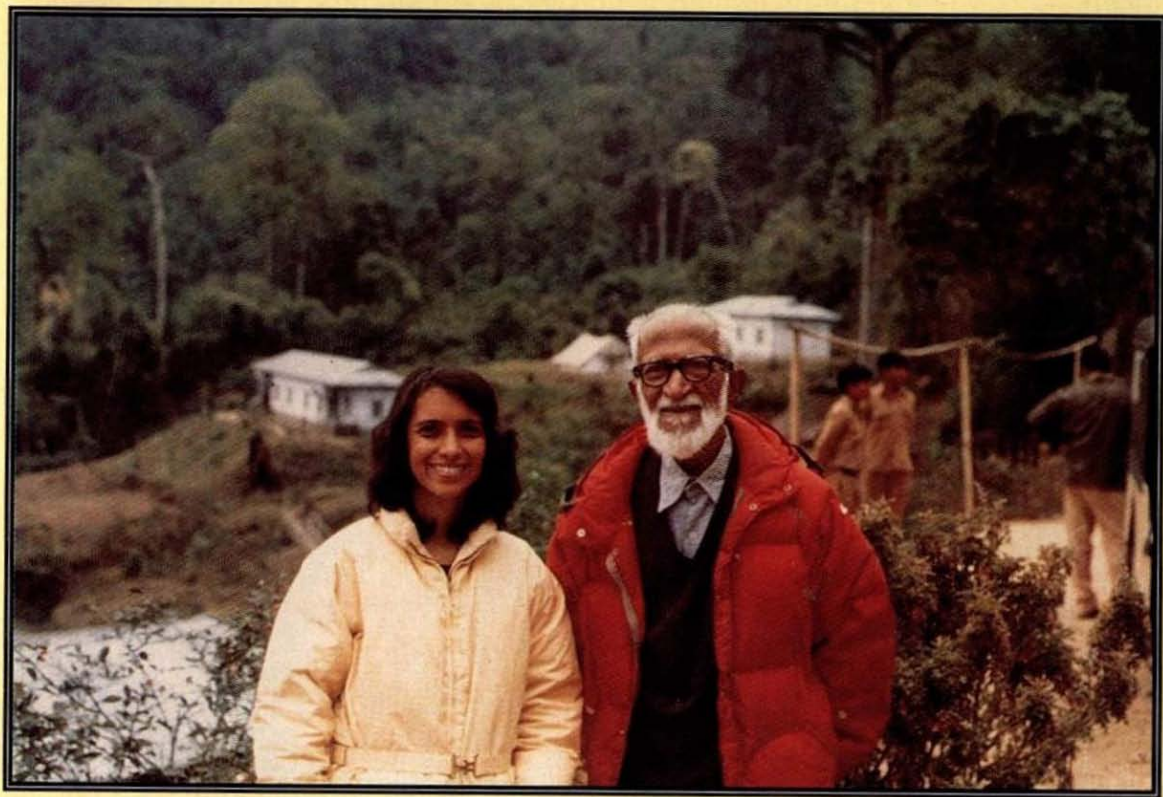
Receiving the IUCN Award from the Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi

totally in the feast that nature provided to his discerning mind and eye. We went to the Rann of Kutch in the hope of ringing flamingoes — and found ourselves having to wade through a deluge of rain water on camel back. The camels made excruciatingly slow and bumpy progress, and we could neither dismount for a meal, nor for more pressing requirements! The faint pink ribbon of flamingoes in the distance took wing when disturbed, probably by smugglers from Pakistan, and the long planned trip was infructuous. I can recall no moaning of discomfort or disappointment — and plenty of occasions for laughter: when the Chief Wildlife Warden fell into the Rann and emerged dripping wet, but with hat firmly on head, or when a camel bolted away — spurred on by the clanging of the metal table and chairs on its back, or when I entered a camel race with our camel drivers — and had to cling on for dear life, and the honour of the BNHS!

And so, in Arunachal and Orissa, we bumped along in old jeeps over dirt roads, in Madhya Pradesh we hunkered down and crept through the high grass in search of the florican and then drove up to that most beautiful of ruined cities — Mandu — where he worked on his autobiography. From these interactions I distill for you some of the essence of Sálím Ali, the conservationist and the person.

He had a great commitment to excellence — he polished his writing till it was just right, his calligraphy was beautiful, his notes and his accounts were meticulous, and his equipment, though ancient, was spotless. He deplored the *chalta hai* attitudes of his compatriots, and vigorously knocked it out of his *chelas*.

He also had a great commitment to objectivity, to truth, or perhaps one can just say that he had a truly scientific temper. However great his commitment to saving a certain area, he would not cross into the realms of hyperbole. He



At 40th mile camp Namdapha, Arunachal Pradesh in February, 1979

therefore had an integrity which many "conservationists" lack, and which enabled him to do more for conservation than those who indulge in public posturing.

I had occasion to work with him closely on the Silent Valley and other issues, and to see and appreciate this quality repeatedly. I took up this battle because he said the area was a truly fine one, worth saving.

He had earned, and held, the respect of many — including Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. I had many occasions to see at first hand Mrs Gandhi's regard and affection for him — in her responses to his letters and on personal visits which we made. Setting up a separate Ministry of Environment, for instance, was something that may largely owe its existence to a proposal from him. I recall R. K. Dhawan once telling us that the Prime Minister had instructed that any letter from Dr. Sálim Ali should be immediately forwarded to her, without interception — and I

have also seen how keen she was to accommodate his requests whenever she could. Examples from the Silent Valley campaign will demonstrate this.

Politically, any suggestion to drop the Silent Valley project was a very hot potato. Located as it was, in the backward region of Palghat in Kerala, pushing through this project was the one issue on which all parties in Kerala were united. It was political suicide to suggest the dropping of this project — and anyone who did so in Palghat was likely to be physically assaulted. It was against this backdrop that Sálim, on my presenting him with one more letter to sign, advised me to stop breaking my head against a stone wall: it was too difficult and too late to stop the project. When I said that we would stop only when the valley was under water, he sighed — and signed! He had underestimated the determination of those who were opposing the project, and the power of his own credibility. Mrs Gandhi could not speak out against the



ASAD RAHMANI

Marine Drive June 1987 — a tribute from Nana Chudasama, former Sheriff of Bombay

project — but a letter he wrote to her before we left for Bharatpur, asking her to rein in the Congressmen in Kerala who were clamouring for the project, had been attended to by the time we reached Delhi a week later. She gave us an unscheduled appointment — and kept hundreds of party aspirants waiting while she explained how difficult it was to stop a project at this stage. Yet bit by bit she worked to stop the project.

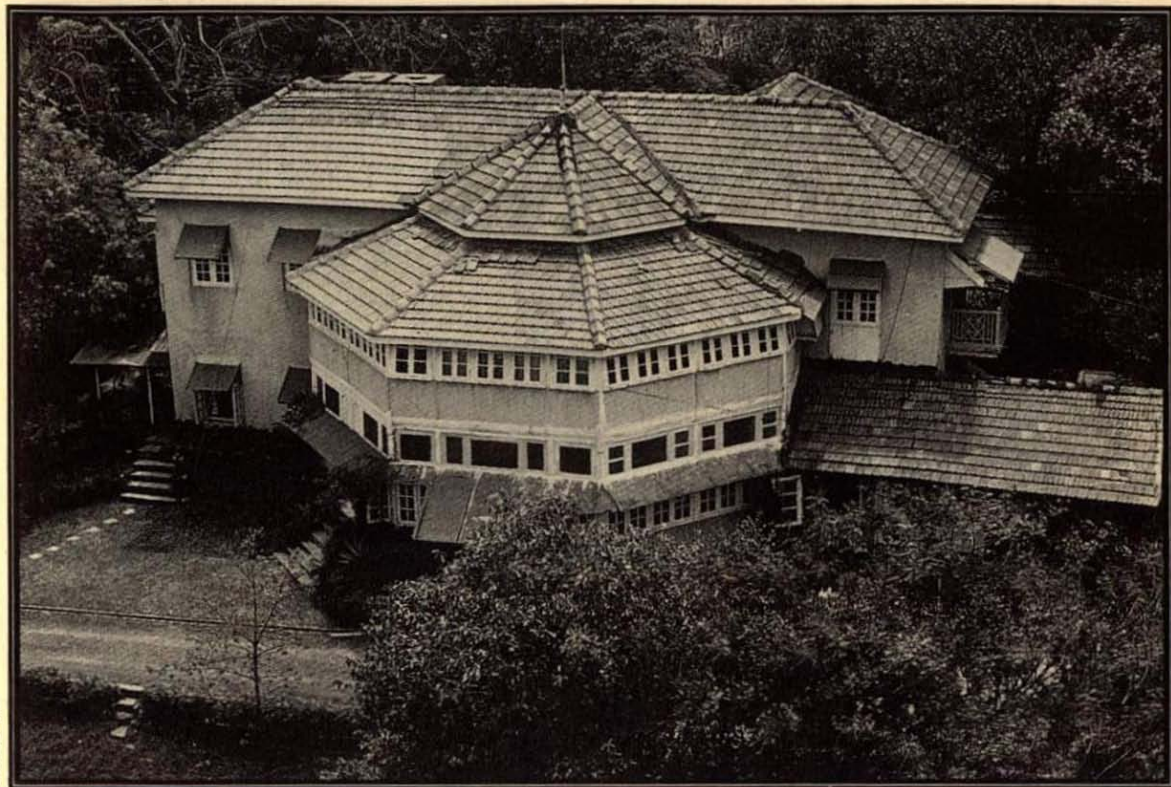
One wonders how many more areas might have been saved if Sálím had been as tenaciously drawn into other campaigns. Perhaps his own credibility would have suffered. Silent Valley was one of the truly untouched areas — and he was willing to lend his weight to the campaign, and to speak out against it repeatedly. It was a particularly tough battle, and on other occasions a letter or two from him was all that was needed. But he often told me that a knife should not be used too often, or it would become blunt!

As a conservationist, his life was his message.

There was no waste. His food was limited, and he was merciless with those who allowed themselves to become even a little plump! His clothes, and his belongings, were used and re-used. At the age of 85 plus he declined the air-conditioned comfort of setting up home in the Tata Hydro guest house on the grounds that it would make him 'soft'!

Ultimately, it was not just his ability, but certain traits of character that made him so effective. If he could be tough with his criticism, he could also be warm in his praise and appreciation. He could be stubborn and strong willed — and yet had the humility to learn, to question and to accept correction. Those who ventured to approach the 'Great Man' found him totally approachable. He could charm people with his ready wit and his ready smile — and by being simple, genuine and unassuming despite all the fame that had come his way. The BNHS was dearest to his heart, but he was never small or





No. 46, Pali Hill — his shared home for forty years

exclusive; he was available to anyone who promoted the cause of conservation.

He had his drawbacks, though less than most. He could be insensitive to the aspirations of others and this occasionally brought him the bitter fruits of their resentment. He loved beauty and peace — but did not shy away from fighting for what he thought was right, even though he was sometimes wrong! With the young scientists who worked with him, he was always supportive — and some took advantage of this to behave like prima donnas, and subvert administrative proprieties. He hated the unpleasantness of conflicts, especially when they embroiled his beloved BNHS, but did not quite know how to sort them out. But no man is perfect — and the affection and regard that he inspired in so many hearts, from heads of State to little children, from students to fellow scientists, from strangers to those who knew him well — helped him to win friends and allies and to do an enormous amount

for the study and conservation of nature in a long and joyous lifetime.

If the BNHS wants to honour his memory, it will not be by the garlanding of his picture — which would have made him squirm even while he politely accepted it. It is not by naming assorted Chowks and Institutions after him, because he was chary of such adulation. The scientific study of the natural world, leading to the conservation of wild species and wild habitats, and spreading wide the joy which he derived from nature, was what his life was about. It is what would please him best. One hopes his birth centenary year will bring this to pass, and that we will seek out the essence of what he stood for, and make it an inseparable part of ourselves and of the institution which he loved. □

*Mrs. Dilnavaz Variava, Vice President BNHS, is deeply involved in Conservation issues.*



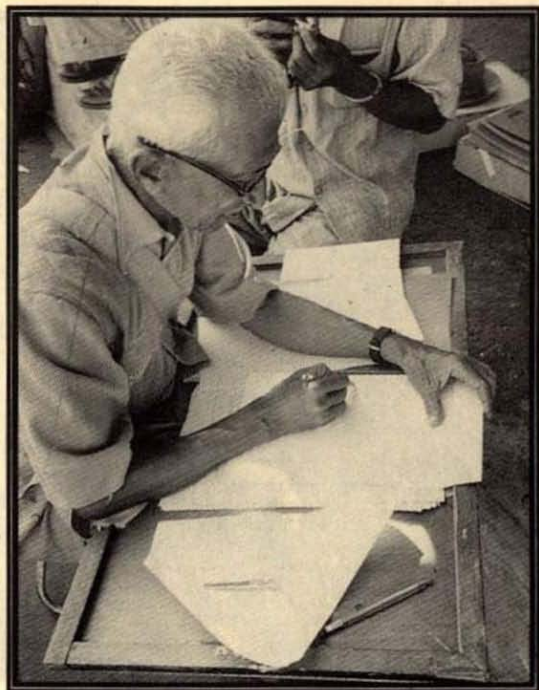
## Sálim Ali and the Birds of Kutch

M.K. Himmatsinhji

Dr. Sálim Ali first came to Kutch in the year 1943. His Highness Maharao Vijayarajji, my father, felt it was high time a new revised edition of the book on the birds of Kutch was published, since the older work of Capt. C.D. Lester, written at the beginning of this century, had become out of date. Hence, the ideal person for undertaking the task was Dr. Sálim Ali, who was invited to come to Kutch for that purpose. He surveyed the whole area of the then State of Kutch in 1943-44. My contact with him then was rather sporadic since I was studying at school. However I did get a few opportunities of meeting him at lunch or when he came to see His Highness every now and then during his survey work. They would talk about other matters as well, but as a rule birds were the main topic of discussion. Their

conversation would also cover various works published in India and they would comment upon styles of writing such as that of EHA (E.H. Aitken). All the while I would sit listening to their interesting conversation with rapt attention.

Later on came the period when I was able to accompany Dr. Sálim Ali on birdwatching outings which proved most interesting as well as educative. He had a quick eye and a remarkable ability to notice, and even identify in a flash, a bird that would dart from one bush to another. In spite of this talent he would never jump to a conclusion while identifying birds. If one asked him to identify a bird he would, more often than not, invariably say "I think it is such and such." He used to be extremely particular in this regard and expected others to be the same. In the same



Recording banding data in Kutch in 1959

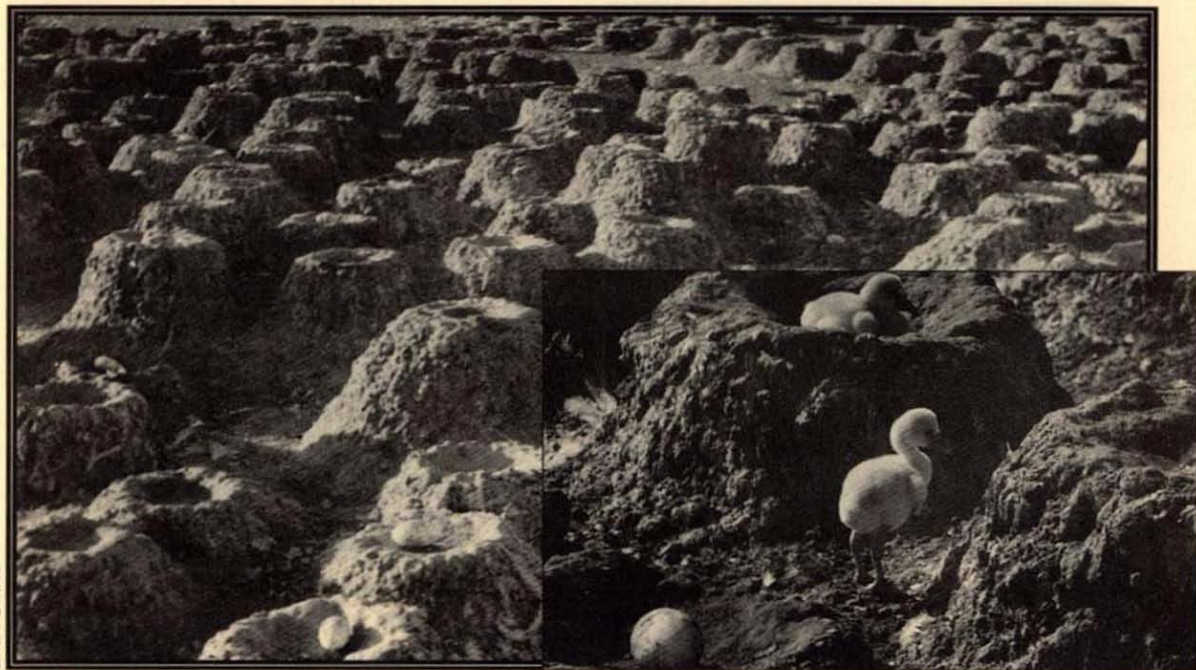
manner S.A. would insist on obtaining specimens of species which were either rare or recorded for the first time.

I shall give a typical example of what I state above. On several visits to the Great Rann of Kutch Dr. Sálím Ali saw the little gull *Larus minutus* in flocks which he identified. He just kept note of this occurrence to himself till 1974. Then he observed them more closely, in January of that year. Even so, he made a conservative comment in the *Journal* (Vol. 71, No. 3) "...I observed rather distant flocks of a puzzling gull which it struck me at the time could, by all the rules of the game, be no other than the little gull." Further on in the same paragraph he goes on to say, "I was able to watch a fairly large flock sufficiently closely to support my earlier conjecture, though confirmation must still await a specimen."

The first netting and ringing programme in Kutch in 1959 was jointly organised by the World Health Organisation, Bombay Natural History Society and the Virus Research Centre, Poona.

The chief objective of that project, besides studying the endemic and migratory birds, was to look for parasites in the plumage, especially of birds coming from Central Asia, which were at that time suspected of carrying the germs of certain diseases. The location chosen by Dr. Sálím Ali for netting was in the vicinity of a small game-observation structure with a small room and a verandah all round it. Thereafter, a series of netting programmes followed, starting from the year 1960. One of the locations chosen was Kuar Bet off Pachham Island on the edge of the Great Rann. The BNHS party stayed at Bhuj, in my late brother's house. Somehow I could not go for the netting, but when they returned I went to my brother's house. I found Dr. Sálím Ali simply delighted with the results achieved, particularly because two specimens, a male and a female of the grey *Hypocolius* were obtained. He immediately informed me about it and took me to the verandah, where all the skins were laid out on a table, to show me the two specimens. He was particularly happy over this bird record because it came thirty years after his own of the same species at Kihim. Had he been alive today, he would have been glad to learn that *Hypocolius ampelinus* has been recorded near Fulay village for five seasons running from January 1990 to November 1994. This was during the Bird Migration Study and the Grasslands Ecology Projects. During the latter project over a hundred grey *Hypocolius* were counted by J.K. Tiwari.

Kutch was one of the areas of India in which the great conservationist and the 'Grand Old Man of Indian Ornithology' had a special interest. The reasons for this interest were, firstly that it was the only place where the greater flamingo bred. Then, the geographical position of this area lay in the path of the migration of several species of birds; and the third reason was the ornithological surprises that it held in store for the birdwatcher. When Dr. Sálím Ali went to the flamingo breeding ground in 1945, he discovered avocets breeding on the periphery of



Flamingo breeding ground with chicks (inset) visited frequently by Dr. Sálím Ali since 1943

the flamingo nests. This was the first record of these birds breeding within our biogeographical limits. Dr. Sálím Ali estimated that more than half a million flamingoes, including their young ones, were present in the breeding colony that year. On his subsequent visit in 1960, Dr. Sálím Ali found the rosy pelican breeding among the old nests of flamingoes, which was also a first record for India. But the crowning glory in the annals of Indian ornithology, if I may term it so, came his way when in January, 1974, Sálím Ali along with the late Shivraj Kumar Khacher, found the lesser flamingoes breeding along with their greater cousins.

As already mentioned, Kutch lies on the migration route of several species of birds that come from across the northern borders of the subcontinent. To quote Dr. Sálím Ali on this subject: "The chief interest of Kutch ornithology lies in the geographical position of this narrow strip of land relative to the mighty tide of migration that sweeps into India from beyond its northern and northwestern boundaries, and

out again, in the autumn and spring of each year. Apart from the migrants that come to spend the winter here and in peninsular India (wild fowl etc.), the area is of further importance in that it lies on the extreme eastern fringe of a broad stream of through-migration that flows down from Central and Northern Asia in a southwesterly direction in autumn and *vice versa* in spring."

The last visit of Dr. Sálím Ali to Kutch was in 1979. We had extremely heavy rainfall that year and the Great Rann was fully inundated. S.A. had asked me to inform him if the flamingoes had started their nesting activities. The birds had not arrived, as in most parts of the Rann the water was too deep then. Soon after this the Forest Department, on the basis of some wrong information, sent off a message to the BNHS that the birds had arrived. Keen as ever to visit the breeding colony, the 'grand old man' rushed to Kutch and went through a difficult and extremely uncomfortable camel-ride to the Flamingo City which was under unusually deep

water and of course there was no sign of the birds! There was no dry spot for miles around, so the party could not dismount anywhere and had to endure an uncomfortably long camel ride. Writing about a previous trip, Dr. Sálím Ali had described camel rides as "some of the most uncomfortable saddles ever designed.... over alarmingly slithery slush". I could never forgive those people who sent the wrong message; but as far as S.A. was concerned, one had to admire his keenness, determination and power of endurance even at that ripe old age.

The conditions in the Great Rann have changed over the years, for dams have been built over the two main rivers, the Luni of southwest Rajasthan and the Banas of north Gujarat, which used to empty into the Rann. The waters of these two rivers flow into the Great and the Little Ranns respectively, only during years of heavy rainfall in Barmer and Banaskantha districts. Thus the ecological conditions have undergone a change not conducive to the breeding of the greater flamingo in the main breeding colony and during recent years these birds have started breeding in a location in the western part of the Great Rann on a smaller scale. Between ten to twenty thousand birds have been estimated to breed in the new location.

A marked fall in the numbers of other migratory birds has been noticed during the last thirty years or more. Species such as the warblers, chats and larks, once so common, and even abundant, are not to be seen in the same numbers in Kutch as before. During his last visit in 1979, Dr. Sálím Ali asked me "Where are all those little birds? One does not see them these days". The numbers of waders on the coast and on inland waterbodies have also markedly declined. However, a swing back in the numbers of duck species is noticeable, with the count of pintail, gadwall, etc., steadily increasing. But there appears to be a population explosion of coots. Some pairs even stay on in Kutch and breed when conditions are suitable.

Among the endemic species, the white-winged black tit is on the decline and this is mainly due to habitat destruction. In any case it was patchily distributed, and now it is holding out in fewer pockets. Overgrazing of grasslands and the spread of *Prosopis juliflora* over them has reduced and ruined the great Indian bustard areas. The other ground-dwelling birds are also badly affected by this weed. Though the overall picture is grim, one hopes better days will be ushered in with timely and concrete conservation measures. These would be a true and sincere tribute to the memory of Dr. Sálím Ali. □

Maharao M.K. Himmatsinhji of Kutch has had the privilege of a close personal and ornithological relationship with Dr. Sálím Ali. He is a life member of the BNHS.

## WHOM THE BIRDS LOVED

*A washed saucer-like sun  
Is pushed down by the evening song of birds  
Under the crumpled sheet of darkness.  
Salim Ali returns to roost  
Forever, to a nest fashioned  
Out of straws of songs  
And pieces of evening's last sunrays  
The white Siberian cranes from the cold North  
Join him in the drama of evolution  
Where new species explode and some die.  
For extinction is forever.  
Across the theatre of the Indian sub-continent  
Birds enact for him a hymn of praise  
In their language of whistle and song.  
As forked lightning swings  
Like branches of a tree against blue sky  
A peacock's shafted shriek  
Probes the abyss of darkness  
In quest of Sálím Ali.*

Man Mohan Singh

It happened during the celebrations of his 75th birthday. A local daily humorously wrote that Dr. Sálím Ali took to birds because he was not worried where his next meal came from. But a few of us who were close to him knew why he did so.

It all happened because of a review by an anonymous reviewer in the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*. The subject was the second volume of E.C. Stuart Baker's *Fauna of British India — Birds*, published in 1924. In its course,

the anonymous reviewer lamented the absence of a single reference to the work of an Indian in the two volumes published up to that time. He concluded from such an absence that the work he was reviewing happened to be the "swan-song" of all aesthetic pursuits in India once the country became independent.

To Dr. Sálím Ali such remarks came as a gross national affront. The reviewer and the world at large had to be shown that such fears were baseless. To do so, Dr. Sálím Ali gave up his

## His legacy to India

J.S. SERRAO

“

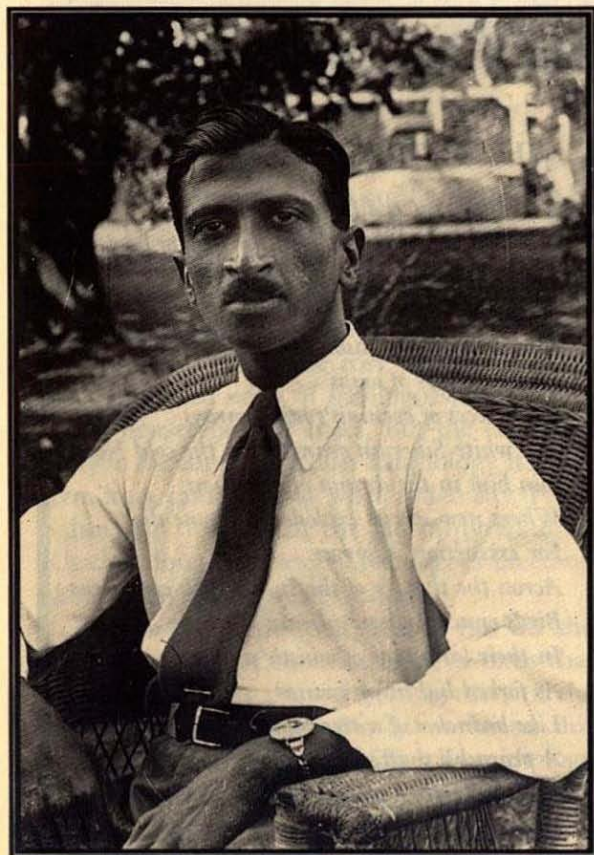
Dr Sálím Ali never favoured glorifying him for his achievements.

Nevertheless, we must record our indebtedness to him for having instilled in us love for the outdoors, for the knowledgeable birders he produced through his writings on birds, and for making his fellowmen conscious of the importance of conservation.

”

business and took to the whole-time pursuit of studying birds. His first bird note appeared in the Society's *Journal* in 1926.

To pursue bird taxonomy, Dr. Sálím Ali proceeded to Germany to study under Prof. Erwin Stresemann in 1929. Reading through the bird literature he published since his return from Germany, one finds that collecting birds, skinning and stuffing, and measuring them in decimals of



Sálím Ali — the early years

a millimetre did not interest him. Splitting species and erecting new subspecies was something he loathed to do. He was interested in the *living bird*. He wrote extensively on the behaviour, ecology and economics of the birds he came across. His aim was to try and discover why a particular form is adapted to live in certain environments and the particular part it played in the general scheme of nature.

The bird surveys he conducted, often to the remotest parts of the Subcontinent, are reported in the Society's *Journal*. The most valuable part of such reports, one finds, are the copious notes on the ecology and life-history of the birds met with. Leading international ornithologists of the time in Europe and America found that such reports were educative, setting a standard for similar work in other parts of the Subcontinent. His reports contained extremely clear summaries of the geographical environment, and the factors influencing birdlife.

It was hoped that his efforts would smoothen the attitude of the establishment towards an up and coming Indian ornithologist. However, they did not. His work failed to receive the necessary encouragement. He used to recall with amusement how difficult it was for him to secure a job. The job he desired was nothing better in status than that of a gallery assistant's. Such a job he desired to enable him to keep in touch with bird collections.

However, his work came to the attention of our national leaders. It thus stood in good stead for the BNHS in the years following India's Independence.

Dr. Sálim Ali's ornithological world was crumbling all around him in the mid '30s. His near and dear ones started dissuading him from his whole-time pursuit of birds. They felt that he should follow something lucrative. But Dr. Sálim Ali could not be prevailed upon. His fortitude and tenacious pursuit of the subject of his choice becomes evident when one recalls his reply to one of his well-wishers in August 1936. Its concluding part reads: "... Our future plans are uncertain and nebulous as ever. There are, as usual, a number of things in the air, all of a more

or less temporary and of ornithological nature, but whether any of them will come to anything still remains to be seen. One has to wait and wait and go on waiting." He was writing this on behalf of himself and his wife — she was his constant companion and helpmate in his bird pursuits.

In 1941, Dr. Sálim Ali published *The Book of Indian Birds*. Illustrated in colour, it soon became the bible of the Indian bird student. Based on the bird surveys, Dr. Sálim Ali wrote books on regional bird books. Often these were translated into regional languages. Through such books it dawned on the common folk that conservation is not the exclusive concern of the scientist, but a challenge to every right-thinking citizen.

Dr. Sálim Ali loved birds as does an Indian farmer. From 1936, he advocated the study of Economic Ornithology in the country. He always believed that such a study would be highly beneficial in a predominantly agricultural country. The role of birds, either beneficial or harmful, in agriculture had to be ascertained. This would help in encouraging the proliferation of beneficial birds, and keeping down populations of harmful species. The credit goes to him when in many of our universities such or similar non-violent scientific studies on birds are now conducted.

In his 85th year, I drew Dr. Sálim Ali's attention to the review I have referred to earlier. I asked him if the unkind remarks therein were responsible for his giving up his business, and opting to study birds. He smiled and replied "Partly. But I always wanted to do what I liked most."

Dr. Sálim Ali never favoured glorifying him for his achievements. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge our indebtedness to him for having instilled in us love for the outdoors, for the knowledgeable birders he produced through his writings on birds, and in general for making his fellowmen conscious of the importance of conservation. □

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*J.S. Serrao worked on Dr. Sálim Ali's Handbook Project, served BNHS for many years and continues to lend his valuable services to the Society after retirement.*

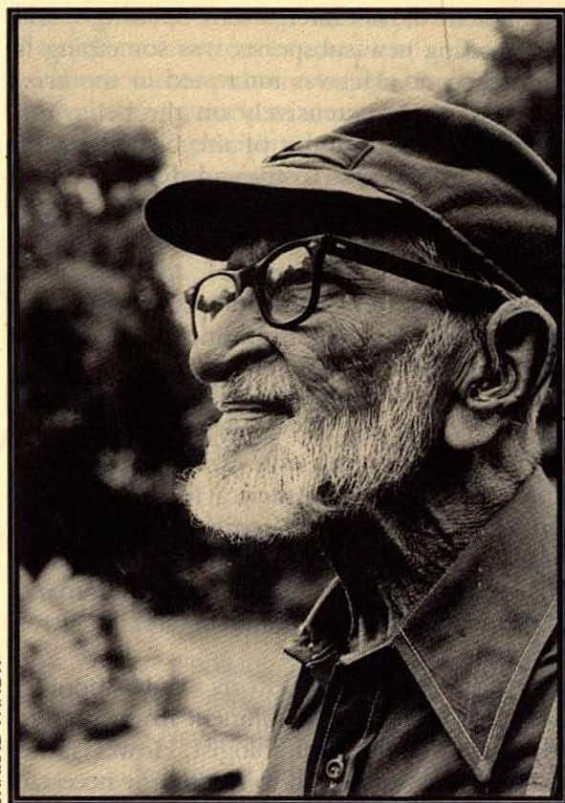
# A Lifetime of Association with Sálím Ali

IN INDIAN ORNITHOLOGY AND CONSERVATION

S. Dillon Ripley

It is rare to find a long-time friend with whom one can wholeheartedly pursue shared goals that result in advances in both science and conservation. Such a relationship, based largely on mutual respect and shared interests, existed between Dr. Sálím Ali and myself, and lasted from 1943 through Dr. Ali's passing in 1987.

We first met during the Second World War, while I was stationed in Ceylon, and I happened to be passing through Bombay on my way to Delhi. By this time, we were both deeply entrenched in the ornithology of the region, myself mostly from a taxonomic standpoint and Sálím from the ecological side. I had obtained a copy of Sálím's *The Book of Indian Birds* from a shop in a railway station, and, as with many other people in India, was quite impressed and entertained by it. Sálím also knew of me, having read some of my scientific papers. Upon meeting in the museum in Bombay, we found we very much liked one other and so struck up a friendship. Sálím was



SHARAD PANDIT

cheery and full of humour, the kind of person everyone wanted to be around. Almost immediately we began to lay ambitious plans for future collaboration, though we knew this could not commence until after the war.

Fortunately, the war soon ended, and we were able to begin to make our plans a reality. In 1946, while Sálím and I were in the previously unexplored Mishmi Hills, we began to discuss the idea of creating an all-new handbook to the birds of the Indian subcontinent, one that would bring together and update the pertinent information on every bird known to occur in the region. Soon thereafter, Sálím visited Yale for a few months at my invitation for the purpose of planning in earnest; it was exciting at that time to see the project taking shape. To provide a taxonomic framework for the *Handbook*, however, I had to first produce my book, *A Synopsis of the Birds of India and Pakistan*. From



this beginning, the ten-volume *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan* became a major, time-consuming, but rewarding longterm project; it was eventually completed and was well-received, and is now in its second edition. It is gratifying to know that the *Handbook* has continued to serve the needs of those with an interest in the region's birds, and that it is widely regarded as the authoritative reference on the tremendously rich avifauna of the Indian Subcontinent.

On numerous occasions, Sálím Ali and I, together with my wife Mary, undertook arduous but rewarding and memorable expeditions in far-flung and little-known parts of the Indian subcontinent, many of them to virtually unexplored and restricted areas for which special permissions were required for entry by foreigners. The former King of Bhutan, Druk Gyalpo, himself keen about birds, personally authorized several ground-breaking expeditions for us to Bhutan, that took place between 1966 and 1973. The King even presented us with a much-desired prize, a specimen of the elusive orange-rumped honeyguide, and told us where we could find more!

At that

time, Bhutan was closed to foreigners and had long been so; although some ornithological work had been done in the country, the surveys we conducted with Dr. Biswamoy Biswas remain the major work on birds of Bhutan.

Sálím's persuasiveness, his engaging writing style, and the popularity of his books gained him important friends and benefactors, and opened many doors for him, as did my position as Director of the Yale-Peabody Museum, and then as Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. Through persistence, we were able to make even our most ambitious and elaborate research and expedition plans a reality, despite the not inconsiderable demands of both our positions. We made a concerted effort to conduct expeditions to poorly known regions of the greatest potential scientific interest, such as Arunachal Pradesh, Orissa, Bastar, and the Eastern and Western Ghats. In some cases our surveys are still the latest for these areas, and unfortunately due to habitat deterioration some could also be the last. However, not all of our long-cherished plans bore fruit. For example, despite our getting official permission, the course of events meant we were never able to work on the lofty,



A cherished friendship based on mutual respect and shared interests that lasted a lifetime

unexplored Mt. Saramati, just across the Burmese border from Nagaland; subsequently extensive fires may have spelled the end for the forest, and the many ornithological treasures this isolated peak once promised perhaps no longer exist. Our last expedition with Sálím was to Arunachal, when he was about 90 years old! Even through the mid-1980s we were still making plans for joint field work; this resulted finally in a major ornithological survey of Namdapha in 1988, though Sálím did not live to see it.

At the start of our acquaintance, conservation was not our major concern; however, upon revisiting our field sites and those of others we could not fail to note with sadness the inexorable habitat destruction and the accompanying loss of biodiversity in once-pristine areas. Thus, the early surveys assume added importance for their documentation of baseline diversity, allowing us to assess the nature and extent of human-induced changes.

Later in our careers, we become increasingly motivated by the overriding importance of conservation in India, and we expended considerable time and energy speaking out on the critical need for conservation. The statement

I made at a BNHS meeting in 1968, in which I forecast the extinction from the wild of the tiger in 20 years, seems to have been the deciding factor in the launching of Project Tiger, both within India and in Nepal. Though this went on to become a conservation success story for its time, tigers are now sadly threatened even more insidiously by rampant poaching for trade with the Far East, and it now appears possible that I did not greatly overstate the gravity of the tiger's plight. Other success stories have been more permanent, such as the rediscovery of the Jerdon's Courser at our instigation, and the presence of a whole new generation of conservation-minded Indian biologists who now labour intensively for this cause. Sálím would, I believe, join me in feeling satisfaction in knowing that his persuasiveness, enthusiasm, and dedication deserve much credit for awakening and bolstering the conservation movement in India, and will no doubt continue to do so for many years. □

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*Dr. Sidney Dillon Ripley is the Secretary Emeritus, Smithsonian Institution, USA, and a close friend and professional associate of Dr. Sálím Ali.*

S.A. HUSSAIN



In camp with Dr. Sálím Ali, in the northeast Himalayas

## Ode to Sálím on his seventy-seventh Birthday

12 November 1973, in camp, Bhutan

From the Wakhan and the Rann  
To Point Calimere and Kandy

In monsoon rain or sun,  
In dak bungalow or dandy,  
Wherever there are birds

You will hear the reverent words:  
Oh Sálím's our hero, Sálím's the man  
Whose knowledge is always on tap.  
The terror of wrens, Finn's Baya's fan,

A truly remarkable chap.  
So ho for the wedgebilled Wren  
And hey for the tragopan hen;  
So ho for the tweet tweet tseep  
And hey for the leopard's cheep.

Let's squeak like Blewitt's Owl  
And honk like water fowl  
As through thicket, bog and heather  
We hunt for Hume's stray feather.  
Oh Sálím's our hero, Sálím's the man  
Whose knowledge is always on tap.  
The terror of wrens, Finn's Baya's fan,

A truly remarkable chap.  
For our part we know all his knowledge will glow  
For ages to come, his lamp will shine out.  
His birthday we sing while pheasants all crow  
And birds of all kinds join in tuneful shout.  
Nor Hodgson nor Baker knows more about life  
Nor Coltart nor Inglis have weathered the strife  
About bird lore and bird song with steadier light  
Than our hero whose birthday we welcome tonight.  
Oh Sálím's our hero, Sálím's the man  
Whose knowledge is always on tap.  
The terror of wrens, Finn's Baya's fan,  
A truly remarkable chap.

S.D. Ripley

"The Bombay Natural History Society decided to bring out a Festschrift issue of the *Journal* in commemoration of my seventy-fifth birthday on 12 November, 1971, for which Dillon Ripley amiably accepted the editorship and offered to obtain suitable

contributions from our international circle of mutual ornithological colleagues and friends. To a somewhat over-generous Introduction to the Festschrift (which was later published by Oxford University Press in book form as *A Bundle of Feathers*) Ripley added in lighter vein a 'poetasterical' panegyric of his own make which cannot be allowed to escape immortalization."

Sálím Ali — *Fall of a Sparrow*

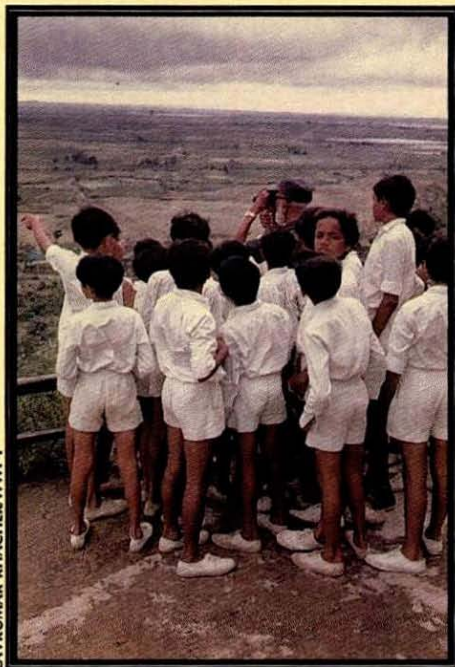
# Birding with Sálim Ali

Lavkumar Khacher

I have been asked to write about my professional interaction with Sálimbhai. The task is very difficult because for me birds have never been separate from the rest of my existence. The great threats to our environment are increasing and I am continually experiencing a palpable anxiety. For Sálimbhai too, I suspect, it was birds all the time and my time with him was always spent discussing birds. So, if "professional contacts" mean bird contacts, I am afraid there were hardly any other. At moments like these I regret not having kept a meticulous diary, as he always urged me to do because so many interesting and perhaps valuable experiences have become faded memories.

Sálim Ali entered my life during the serialising of his then forthcoming book, the *Book of Indian Birds*, in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*. At about the same time, my uncle brought back from Bombay the first edition of the book. The full page accounts of each species were eminently readable, but by flicking through the illustrations I had recognised most of the birds depicted. Yes, in my early teens I was already a knowledgeable birdwatcher, as indeed, so many children living in the country often are, and I remember jokingly telling Sálimbhai very much later "Had you delayed writing the book, I would have done so!"

My first meeting with him was very brief — and in retrospect not a satisfying one. It was in 1948 when as a student I had visited the Phipson



LAVKUMAR KHACHER/WWF

Sálim Ali talking to a group of Rajkumar College boys at the first nature camp at Hingolghadh.

address of the Society. I remember Sálim Ali coming in and my being introduced to him. I had found him rather aloof, though very much later I came to realise that he was a shy person and not quite able to relax in the company of strangers, including young people, especially those who looked on him as something other than an ordinary human being. His international fame and his manner of handling it came very much later.

This first apparent brush off did not dilute my respect for him and a couple of years later when I went up to the Delhi University to study Botany at St. Stephen's College, Sálim

Ali happened to visit the capital and I organised a tea party on the college lawns for him. It was there that the ice began to break. While eating *barfis* and pastries (he enjoyed the former unabashedly) a nondescript brown bird came hopping along. Quite casually he asked me what the bird could be and when I, with the cockiness of a precocious youth replied "Brown rock chat!"

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Could it not be a female Indian robin?" I remember being a little put off, and always thereafter, I gave every chat a second glance and every hen robin closer scrutiny!

It was during that same visit when there were a galaxy of birdmen assembled — all treating me like a child protégé — that I got my second lesson in caution. I think Sálim Ali was there, and Dharmakumarsinhji. One of the ladies, the wife of a Professor at the University, asked what a raptor flying high above us was. It was obviously a pariah kite, but fortunately my upbringing prevented my speaking out of turn with all those elders around. It was the legendary Horace Alexander who glanced up and responded as only

a pucca sahib can "Presumably a Pariah Kite"!...Usha Ganguli, who finally became the First Lady of the University, confided that she was working hard to finish a book on the birds of Delhi. "Several of your observations are in it." When I received my copy I scanned through it and there was a record by myself of swallow shrikes over Delhi, an identification



At Hingolghadh bird banding camp holding a scops owl, with Kishorebhai Gohel

I had casually made and passed on in conversation. It was much later that I realised that the birds I had seen high overhead, before that query on the college lawns, were pratincoles seen in unfavourable monsoon conditions. Years later, a rash identification got into print. I mention this because Usha Ganguli went on, like I did, to be accepted at face value by Dr. Sálím Ali, the renowned Indian ornithologist. Several years elapsed after that tea party and the rock chat lesson. I had submitted for the Journal my notes on travels in Garhwal and a pilgrimage to Kailas and Mansarovar. Sálím Ali had been glancing over the material and had liked my writeups. Later I spent a memorable week on Oyster Rock Islands, off Karwar, photographing a pair of whitebellied sea eagles on the nest.

Passing through Bombay, I went to meet Sálím Ali. On a couple of occasions I had gone to his sister's lovely home in Bandra — "Tell the taxi driver at Bandra station to take you to Dilip Kumar's place" he jokingly told me. Later, on one of the visits he took me upstairs to take a chance and "see the great man padding to his bathroom!" We really became close after a week that I spent in Kutch during the very first bird banding programme when mist nets were used. Dr. Schifferli, the Swiss banding expert, had come to help us to develop the dexterity necessary to extract birds enmeshed in the gossamer-like nylon

threads. It was during that week that I learnt how concerned Sálím Ali could be about the slightest injury to the birds. Considering that we were netting large numbers of *baya* weavers it is remarkable how few nets were damaged — these finches to get themselves hopelessly enmeshed. Attending a net loaded with a flock of *bayas* under a sultry October sun in

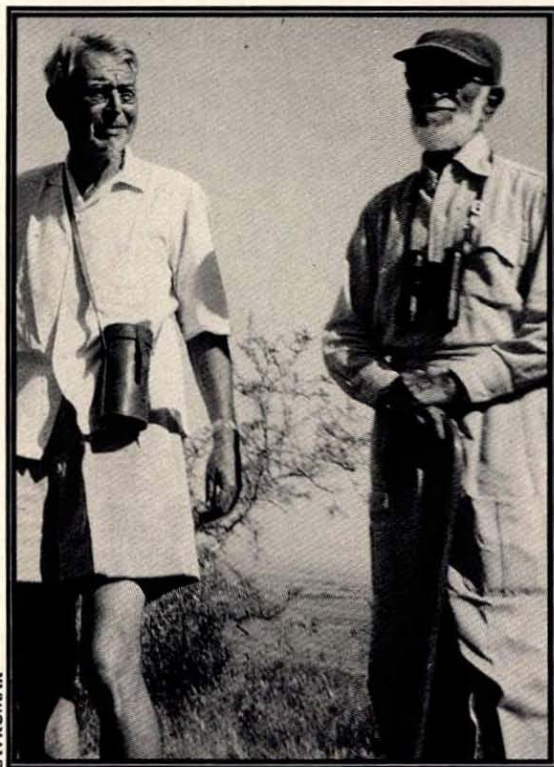
Kutch, backed by the fear of a Sálím Ali tongue-lashing if a bird was injured or a precious net damaged, was certainly nothing to look forward to. It was, therefore, on the very last day, a precious personal recognition he gave me, when he decided to take the worthy Swiss doctor to see the Banni grassland, leaving the camp in my charge. We extracted weighed, measured and made entries for a large number of birds — petronias, sunbirds, robins, buntings, a couple of very angry parakeets, a comparatively philosophic owlet, wren warbler, shrikes with their blooddrawing beaks, and several flocks of the much disliked weavers without any mishap. As the sun lowered to the western horizon, I was justifiably proud — not a single bird hurt, not a single net cut!!

Heaving a great sigh of relief I ordered the nets to be taken down, going on myself to examine a few nets before the staff wound up operations. It was in the very last net that disaster struck — hanging all wound up by the fine black strand was a bird which, only on closer scrutiny, was identified to be a wryneck — the first for the week. All those who have had experience with this relative of the woodpeckers will testify that wrynecks are the worst possible birds to extricate from a mist net because unlike other birds they do not flutter to free themselves, but instead climb up the meshes, falling over the upper strands to

form new pockets each time they scale one panel: the net panels are thus all drawn together, creating a mistnetter's nightmare. I was desperate since this was my very first wryneck, I wanted an intact bird and an undamaged net, and the sun had reached the horizon. Perspiration ran down my nose, and blurred my spectacles and I hated the bird, I loathed the net and I found my self-esteem sinking with each strand I struggled to remove. Just as I decided I would have to cut the strands, the pesky bird turned its neck as wrynecks are apt to do and the last two stands slipped off!

I heaved a sigh of relief as I bagged the bird — the last of the day — even as the sun disappeared below the horizon. As I was wiping my spectacles, a car turned in, its headlights swept past me and up the road. Sálim Ali was rather grouchy because the Banni had been flooded and they saw none of the birds he had wanted to show Schifferli. Far from having time to give me a pat on back, he was in a snappy mood. It was later over dinner that I learnt why he was peeved. It seems Schifferli had told him that he had accepted my invitation and would be getting off at Rajkot the next day to spend a few days at Hingolghadh. He would have preferred that Dr. Schifferli accompany him to the rather prestigious new viral laboratory at Pune where ticks taken off the netted birds were to be studied for the malignant viruses they were supposed to harbour.

That Schifferli's Hingolghadh visit was an



Hawk (R.E. Hawkins) and Sálim at a birdbanding camp at Hingolghadh in the mid seventies

unqualified success is another matter. The outcome was that he recommended the place very strongly as a venue for bird netting and advised Sálim Ali to go and see it for himself. Next year, Sálim Ali accepted my invitation and came over as I was confident he would. Hingolghadh captivated him, as did the family and friends. His almost childlike appreciation of ice cream and mangoes, and his dry humour endeared him to everyone. From that year onward, Hingolghadh became not only a regular venue for bird banding but a place to holiday in. At the same time, a

series of bird banding programmes were organised in Kutch, at Kuar Beyt, and at a couple of other locations. Though I could not join, at my urging the late Shivraj Kumar got actively associated. In the 1975 monsoon when friends in Rajkot helped me to organise the first Nature Camp for WWF-I there, Sálim Ali was a very high profile guest. His affinity for young people, however, had been impressed on me by them.

During one of the Kutch camps I had hesitatingly asked if I could send my son and nephew, both school boys. He readily agreed and the lads returned with cherished memories of the Big Birdman insisting that they eat well and wear pullovers in the mornings! That summer my son joined him at a bird ringing camp on the Dal Lake in Kashmir. At the Rajkumar College I had several promising boys. I suggested that they accompany me on a fortnight's field experience at Bharatpur, which they did. When the time

came for the boys to leave, he asked me why I did not involve more young people in bird banding programmes.

It was at Bharatpur that I met George Archibald of the International Crane Foundation and we discussed a field survey in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh to look for blacknecked cranes. The grant was for myself, to be fielded by WWF-I, but it was my wish to have Sálím Ali leading the group. The summer we were to go to Ladakh, however proved inconvenient for me and my place was taken by Prakash Gole — another good friend, who was respected by Sálím Ali.

By this time I felt that my chance of going on a protracted field trip with Sálím Ali were jinxed. Shortly after his first visit to Hingolghadh, it had been decided that I would help Sálím Ali drive his station wagon from Bombay to Jammu where Shivraj Kumar was to arrive by train. We would motor on to Srinagar where Loke Wan Tho, the millionaire admirer of Sálím Ali would fly in. The plans were cancelled at the very last moment. The second trip was planned for Sálím Ali and myself, a foray into Sikkim with Loke. Even as the final touches to the itinerary were being made at Bharatpur, the Chinese swept into Arunachal Pradesh! The third field trip was to locate the mountain quail. Then came the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and the venture had to be cancelled!

Knowing how stifled he felt in Bombay, I suggested that he fly to Jamnagar instead, where I could arrange for him to see large flocks of crab plovers — something he had never seen before. This visit materialised and though the great flock of crab plovers on Pirotan Island took flight too soon, the trip was memorable for him. This was because the next morning the Jam Sahib uncannily took our party along and parked us in a field where thousands of demoiselle cranes alighted on every side. Sálím Ali was visibly elated at a sight he had never seen before!

It was my privilege to be nominated to a committee by Government of India deliberate on whether bird-ringing should be permitted at Bharatpur. Later, while viewing the water overgrown with grass, Sálím Ali sadly confided

to me "I have never seen it so bad!" He could not restart his bird banding programme at Bharatpur because time was running out. He had lost his sister, then Hassanbhai his brother-in-law, which resulted in his leaving his Bandra residence.

On receiving the Paul Getty Award, for the first time he had money to give away but I remember telling him "Salimbhai, you are now lost to us." I think he valued this knowledge because after he received the Award, whenever I called on him at Pali Hill, Bandra, he solicitously insisted that I stay for dinner.

Perhaps nothing typifies his simplicity more than an episode I was privileged to witness. At a WWF-I camp at the National Defence Academy, Khadakvasla, the Commandant had hosted a lunch. Sálím Ali was the chief guest. After a magnificent spread, everyone dug into huge slabs of coffee ice-cream and even as the liveried waiters were clearing away the dishes, Sálím Ali whispered to me "I would love to have more!"

The Commandant was sitting across the table and I called out to him, "Sir! there is a slight problem!" "What is it?" came the worried response. "Could Dr. Sálím Ali have some more of this magnificent ice-cream?" He burst out laughing and more ice-cream soon appeared of which, I may add, everyone took another very large helping! The Commandant himself gave a large serving to the Birdman.

To conclude, at Hingolghadh, on 23rd August, 1995 as I was rummaging for some paper to write this article on, I found a yellowing copy of the Illustrated Weekly of India with Sálím's picture on the cover and an interview by Pritish Nandy. What thrilled me was his telling the interviewer that he had procrastinated too long in the search for the mountain quail and that in October that year he would go after it. When reminded of his age, he responded, "Don't worry, I will take some friends with me. They will help me through the arduous trek...." I was one among them. Perhaps it is I he wants to go search of the quail.....□

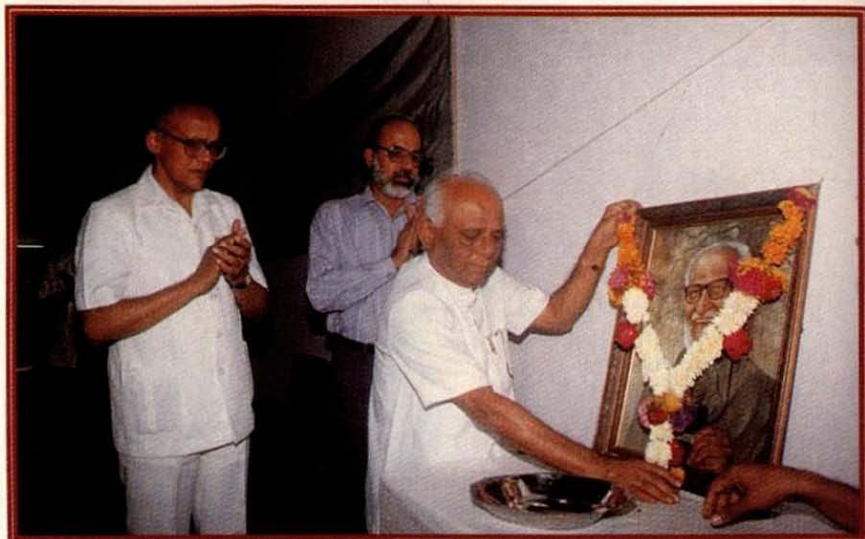
*Lavkumar Khacher is a keen conservationist and birdwatcher from Gujarat. He is a life member of BNHS.*

# Sálim Ali Centenary Celebrations

## A Calendar of Events

□ 11th November, 1995

The beginning of the Sálim Ali Centenary year was marked by a function at Hornbill House for the release of an updated version of the *Pictorial Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* by Sálim Ali and S. Dillon Ripley. The Mayor of Bombay Mr R.T. Kadam inaugurated the function by garlanding a portrait of Dr. Sálim Ali. He was presented with a copy of the book. □



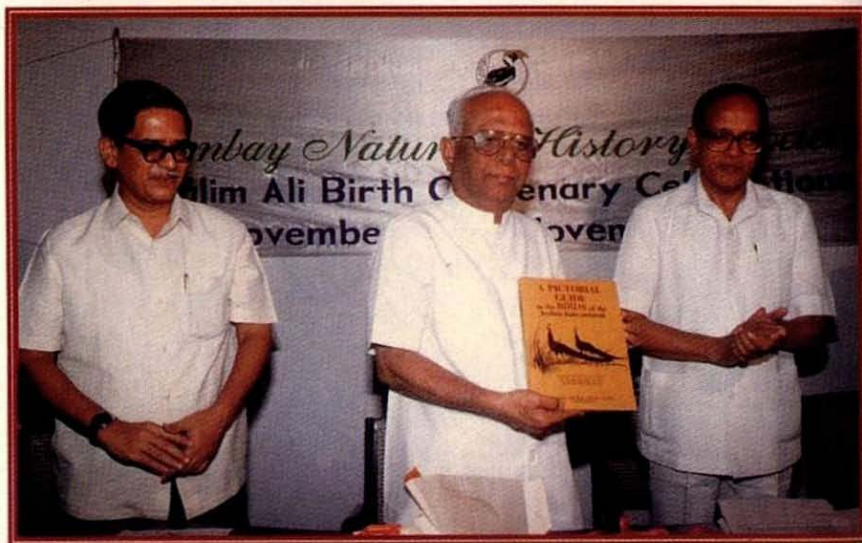
The Hon. Mayor R.T. Kadam garlanding the portrait, while BNHS President Mr. B.G. Deshmukh and Director Dr. Jay Samant look on.

□ 12th November, 1995

The third nationwide Sálim Ali Bird Count was conducted by the BNHS. Participants joined the count locally at the BNHS land at Goregaon. It was well attended by BNHS members and other interested persons. The purpose of the bird count is to make citizens aware about the natural wealth

around them and to move outside the confines of cement and concrete. It helps to consolidate basic information on population fluctuations and species diversity of the birds of particular areas.

Positive results have been gained from this annual event in Bombay itself. The recent report



Release of the *Pictorial Guide* — Hon. Secretary Dr. A.M. Bhagwat with the Hon. Mayor and Mr. B.G. Deshmukh, President, BNHS.

of flamingo concentrations along Bombay's coastline is being used to evolve plans which will protect the much abused coastline. A bird count report received from Indore, regarding Sirpur lake on the outskirts of the city, is being followed up with the concerned authorities as the lake's



bird life is rich enough for it to be considered as a bird sanctuary. The bird count is now a regular feature of the Conservation Cell of the BNHS. □

### □ 15th to 24th December, 1995

*Dr. Sálím Ali's India* an exhibition of rare books and manuscripts from the BNHS collections was organised this year in memory of Dr. Sálím Ali. The exhibition was inaugurated by Maharao Shri Pragmulji, Sawai Bahadur of Kutch, whose family has been personally associated with Dr. Sálím Ali and the BNHS.

The occasion was marked by the release of a set of four colour prints, the first to be published from the John Gould collection of rare lithographs in the possession of BNHS. The folder of prints was formally released by the Maharani of Kutch, Smt. Priti Devi. The fascinating exhibits included many rare books of antique value, the oldest being Gough's *A Comparative view of Ancient Monuments of India particularly those in the island of Salset near Bombay* (1785), *Descriptions of Indian plants — Flora Indica* (1874) by Roxburghius, *Buffon's Natural History* (1821) by Rev. W. Hutton, E.H. Aitken's *Tribes on my Frontier* (1909) and Richard Burton's *Goa and the Blue Mountains* (1851). The books covered the entire gamut of subjects that could possibly interest any dedicated bookworm. Some interesting curios were also on display and added their decorative effect to make the exhibition a grand success.

The exhibition received extensive coverage and appreciation from the press, critics, BNHS members and other visitors. □

### □ 11th to 15th February, 1996

*Sálím Ali Centenary Seminar on Conservation of Avifauna of Wetlands and grasslands.* Asia being the most populated continent has increasing pressures on its natural habitats especially wetlands and grasslands for agriculture and pasture for cattle. This problem looms large and it is a challenge to find ways to reorient the traditional patterns for sustainable use of these habitats.

This International Seminar aims to bring

together experts and planners from the world over to identify and recommend options for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands and grasslands. The seminar will provide exposure the work done in this context.

One of the major outputs of this Seminar is expected to be the development of an international network for the conservation of such habitats by exploiting the possibilities of initiating projects and programmes and to provide a sound basis for future international co-operation.

It is intended to publish a special volume of the BNHS Journal on this theme, which would include the presentations at the seminar and additional contributions.

The sessions will cover cranes, ducks and geese, bustards and flicans, raptors, waders, storks and herons, and a general session on the conservation of grassland and wetland habitats.

The seminar will be held at the Indira Gandhi Institute for Development Research, Bombay. For further details kindly contact the Organising Secretary, Sálím Ali Centenary Seminar. □

### □ 22nd to 28th April, 1996

*Sálím Ali Centenary Nature Photography Competition.* An Exhibition of the prize winning entries of this competition will be held at Hornbill House. Entries depicting flora, fauna and habitats of the Indian Subcontinent (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh) will be accepted and the competition is open to photographers in India and abroad. For further details kindly contact the Honorary Secretary, BNHS. □

**We regret to inform you  
of the sad demise of  
Dr. C.V. Kulkarni,  
former Vice President  
of the BNHS,  
on 28th December, 1995.**

on their northward journey, but seldom rest  
in Ladak. There is considerable evidence that  
certain Turkestan spp. winter in Ladak & not  
elsewhere within Indian limits.

Migration in Sikkim: Winter movement was  
in evidence on the Naku La (14,000 ft) on

21. xii when many birds were  
from east to west from the Chum  
into Sikkim. The foll. spp., not  
elsewhere in Sikkim, were seen  
today, and from their behaviour  
obvious that they were a passage  
*Phoenicurus a. auroreus*, *Acanthis flab.*  
*refostripata*, *Turdus kessleri*, *Monticola*  
*ruficollis*, *M. harfordi*.

There is also movement from the  
parts of the Tibetan Plateau into the  
parts of the same area, such as  
*Podiceps humilis* & *Melanocorypha*  
being obtd. within Indian limits.

(Part II, His 1927 pt. 571-633)

*Tras querquedula* L.

Ladak: When camped at Khardong (13,500')  
on 30. vii. a heavy thunderstorm came over us  
at 5 P.M. & when at its worst, a party of  
Garganes swished down from the clouds



Salim Ali

# The EmPee Saar in Andhra Pradesh

Bharat Bhushan

It was a typical hot stuffy morning on 17th January, 1986, at the Renigunta Airport near Tirupati, in Andhra Pradesh. Beyond the airport one could see the grasslands fringing the foothills of the Eastern Ghats. Had it been May, the heat of the afternoon would no doubt have caused a splendid mirage, perhaps a cheetah chasing a blackbuck.

The lone policeman at the security gate asked me to state my reasons for straying out of the visitors lobby. I informed him politely that I had taken the Airport Manager's permission to receive my boss beyond the security gate and if need be, to approach the aircraft. The policeman looked at me unbelievably, and asked what was special about *this* boss. I had to explain that he was ninety plus, a frail old man, a very important personality, who was also a member of the Rajya Sabha. At this,

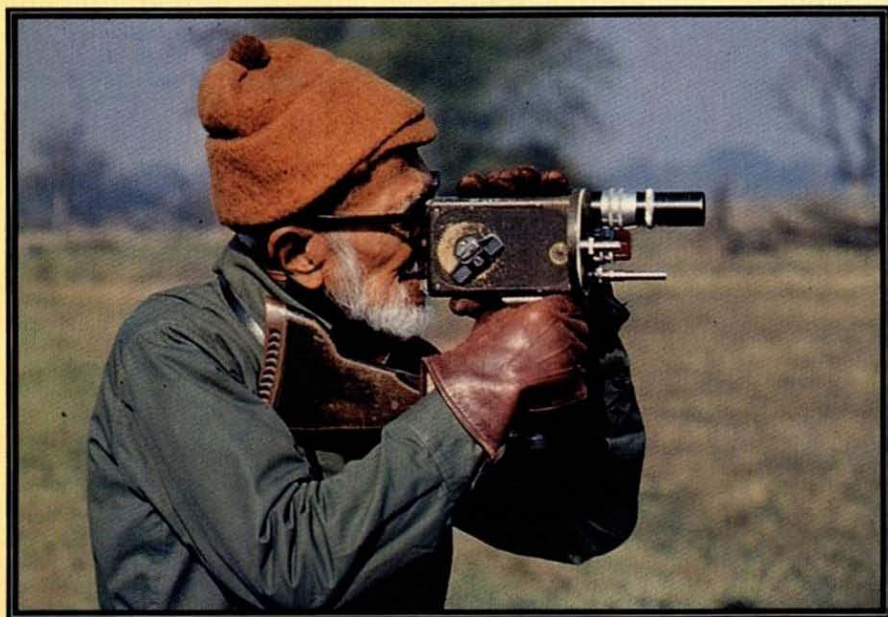
the policeman began to get increasingly skeptical. Where was the VIP reception and the retinue of an important person? Which political party did this MP of mine belong to, anyway? I explained that he was not affiliated to any political party and he was not expecting any VIP treatment either. I was the only person receiving him at Tirupati. The policeman now began to look at me as if I was a suspected terrorist or Naxalite. I did look like one, I think, with my longish beard, khaki and olive green clothes, and a stout walking stick that I had brought along. I explained that the 'Rajya Sabha MP' was coming all the way from New Delhi to see a bird in Cuddapah. Immediately, the police constable asked "Oh? Is he *Daaktar* Sálím Ali? The Bird Man of India?"

To this day, I have never ceased to be surprised at the immediate connection that people make between birds and Dr. Sálím Ali, even in remote and unlikely places.

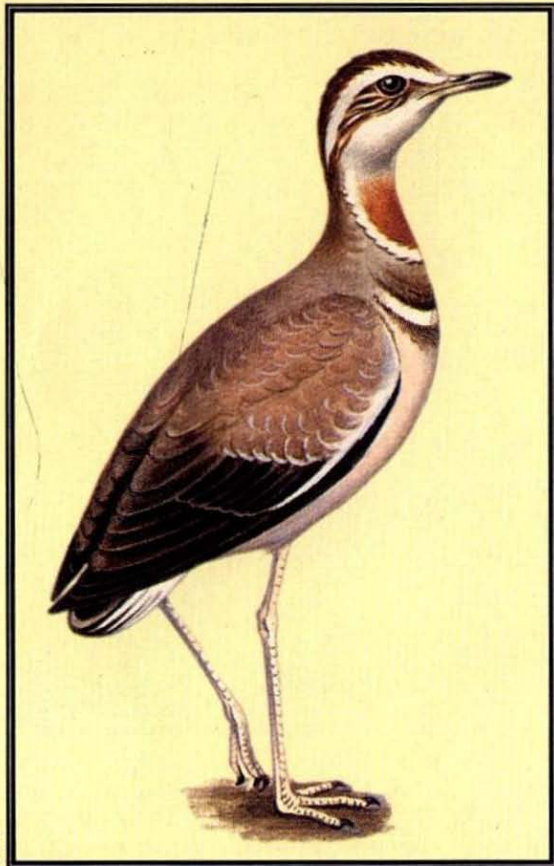
I had been waiting at the Renigunta airport to meet Dr. Sálím Ali, to escort him to Siddavatam near Cuddapah in Andhra Pradesh. The Jerdon's or Double-banded Courser had been rediscovered three days previously and had made great ornithological and natural history news all over the world. Dr. Sálím Ali, the President of the

Bombay Natural History Society, was the Principal Investigator of the Endangered Species Project. I was working on this Project in the Eastern Ghats and had been searching for the Jerdon's Courser since mid-1985.

On his arrival at Renigunta, I went with all the pride that I could muster at being able to talk to Dr. Sálím Ali about the rediscovery of the Jerdon's Courser. He had barely walked four steps when he turned to me and said, "What is your name? Are you with the forest department?"



The Rajya Sabha EmPee at work



The rediscovery of the Jerdon's Courser  
made ornithological headlines

Bang! That was the end of my pride and ego. I had met Dr. Sálím Ali at least five times and presumed that I had impressed him enough for him to remember me. And now he did not even remember my name, or worse, that I was from the BNHS!

I turned helplessly to Mr. P.B. Shekar, his Man Friday, who was walking behind us, lugging all sorts of shapeless cabin baggage. Mr. Shekar was laughing and enjoying my discomfiture. Realising that there was no help from that quarter, I patiently explained that I was from the BNHS and had participated in the rediscovery of the Jerdon's Courser. The "Old Man" did not even smile and in a *very* serious undertone, told me (I remember his words to this day) "Are you sure it is the Jerdon's Courser? If you are wrong, I will not bother to hang you from the nearest palm tree. You should do it yourself!"

Well, up to that point I had been very certain that the bird I had seen in Cuddapah was the Jerdon's Courser. But the menace in Dr. Sálím Ali's voice made me very very uncertain. Was the bird indeed the Jerdon's Courser? What if it wasn't? And now this "rediscovery" thing! What if I was wrong? I did not speak for an hour. Just escorted him mutely, until Mr. Shekar, now shaking with silent and uncontrollable laughter, told me to relax, to watch the Old Man's eyes to see how he was enjoying himself at my discomfiture.

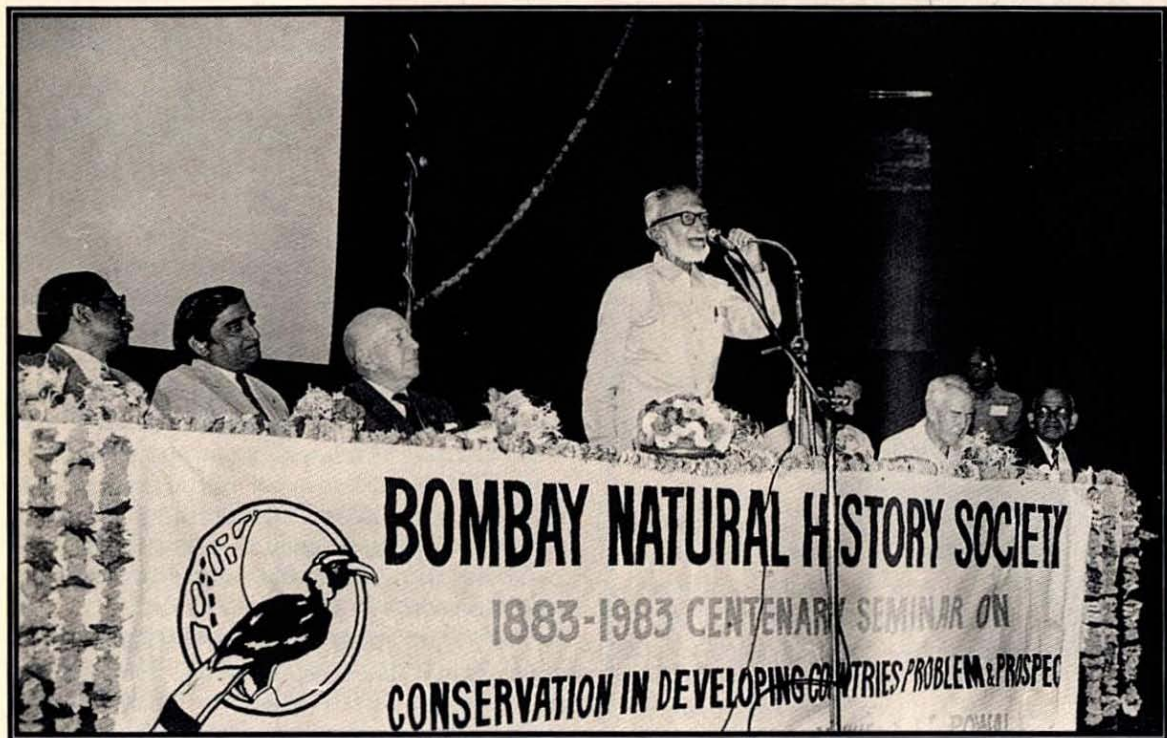
Dr. Sálím Ali, guessing at the exchange, smiled and said, "So? That bird is the Jerdon's Courser? Congratulations. Are you going to give me a party? Chilly Chicken?" I relaxed and began to smile once again. This capacity to instill mortal fright, as well as friendship, of being able to lead his "boys", as he would term most scientists at the BNHS, and the ability to derive perfection from them, was indeed awesome.

Many of my colleagues had similar experiences and no doubt they have written of them. I guess all of us in the eighties had a very personal Sálím Ali Story that we treasured. I leave the pleasure of relating it to them.

Earlier, in 1983, I remember him during the BNHS Centenary seminar, listening carefully to every word that was said. Though the auditorium was quite small, the distance from the podium to the first row was not sufficient for Dr. Sálím Ali's hearing aid to grasp the low volume of the polite biologists. The problem was solved by settling the Old Man in a comfortable armchair on the stage, next to the podium.

Now this was unnerving for most of the biologists at the seminar, who knew him very well. They dared not speak at length, dared not pontificate, nor come between the Old Man and the slides being screened. One could immediately see Dr. Sálím Ali's walking stick being thumped very politely but firmly on the stage. And his questions — they would surely come before anyone in the audience raised a hand. Some of us, new to BNHS were busy laying bets on whether the Old Man had switched off his hearing aid and was asking questions only in order to frighten the poor biologists.

The inaugural function was followed by tea and refreshments. The road between the IIT conference



Speaking on the occasion of the BNHS Centenary Seminar in 1983

hall and the refreshments section ran up a not-so-gentle incline. While Dr. Dillon Ripley and Mrs. Mary Ripley, along with others, walked slowly to get to the refreshments section, Dr. Sálím Ali began walking briskly, ahead of the others, with some of us striving to keep up with him.

Dr. Ripley smiled, and asked, "Sálím, where are you running to? The *chai* will wait and there will be biscuits for everyone." To this, Dr. Sálím Ali turned and replied with a smile, "I am not running, I am showing off. See, I can do this incline better than all of you!"

His qualities of childishness, obvious bossiness and the ability to coerce everyone to be specific and brief, made him endearing and also distant to most of us who had joined the BNHS during the

*To this day, I have never ceased to be surprised at the immediate connection that people make between birds and Dr. Sálím Ali, even in remote and unlikely places. The two are almost synonymous in the minds of most people*

winter of 1982-83. I doubt if anyone would forget the inaugural session of the BNHS Centenary Year celebration at the NCPA, Bombay, which was attended by the late Mrs. Indira Gandhi. That session was probably one of the most triumphant moments of his association with the BNHS.

The Society was given a land grant near the Borivli National Park by Mrs. Indira Gandhi who, during her Inaugural Address, expressed her definite commitment and support to the BNHS.

But all this was lost on me that day. I can only remember Dr. Sálím Ali's sherwani. The long off-white sherwani had a patch somewhere on the back, I think. Here was this living legend, on one of the most memorable days of his life, at a



RICHARD W. CLARK

A moment of leisure at Kihim, where he wrote *Indian Hill Birds*

formal occasion that presented the best of his objectives, wearing an old sherwani that he must have used, reused and overused. The sight of that sherwani made a very distinct impression on me. It was definitely not clothes that had made this man into a legend. It was his life's work and an unwavering commitment to his birds. For me, Dr. Sálím Ali would remain an ideal to follow

After the presentation, Dr. Sálím Ali, Mr. Pushp Kumar and various forest department personnel trooped in to see the site of the rediscovery of the Jerdon's Courser.

After a deliberate explanation of the rediscovery, Dr. Sálím Ali beckoned Aitanna and myself to answer some pointed questions. He began to ask details of the Jerdon's Courser while I interpreted for him. Did the bird skulk at night? Could you see the double bands on the neck very clearly? Could you see the crimson throat patch at night? Could you see it in daylight? How many times did you see the bird? Did you see the plumage in flight? How was the belly colour seen in fading light? What were the colours of the tail underside when

the bird was in flight? To all these queries, Aitanna replied with a patient smile. Here was this frail old MP, *EmPee Saar* as they called him, asking the same questions that they repeatedly asked themselves whenever they went into the forests. To this day, Aitanna swears by the *EmPee Saar*, and reminisces about him in all the interviews that he gives to visiting newspaper reporters.

But the last word must go to the Siddavatam Range Officer who pulled Aitanna aside after his interrogation by the *EmPee Saar*, and asked "I can understand all that nonsense about the bird's colour, habits and flight, but what I cannot understand is *what were you doing standing under that bird's tail, looking at its undertail plumage? And, to think that I have to spend my day escorting some MP from Delhi who travels all this distance to talk to you about the underside colour of the bird's tail when it flies or when it squats!*" □

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Bharat Bhushan, a former BNHS scientist, has worked as programme coordinator for the Asian Wetland Bureau.



A FORTHCOMING  
BNHS PUBLICATION

# Sálim Ali's Book of Indian Birds

Featuring 538 species with descriptions  
from the Indian Subcontinent

All New Colour Plates

Revised

One thing Dr. Sálím Ali never did was preach, and he did not have to; ornithology was both his profession and his hobby, and conservation his way of life. It has been said that Dr. Sálím Ali inspired imitation and devotion. He had more qualities worthy of imitation than most of his contemporary biologists. There was no dearth of people who imitated him. I have heard him publicly discouraging some of them! Most of these imitations went only skin deep and many of the imitators missed the philosophy of Sálím Ali which was based on humanity and kindness, or scientific humanism, very close to the philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Sálím Ali started writing on bird behaviour in the Aristotelian or anecdotal style, but on the whole his approach to biology was that of an ethologist. Throughout his career, Dr. Sálím Ali had a broad based and multidisciplinary approach to biology and in his choice of research topics. Vijayakumar Ambedkar, his first M.Sc. student, studied the breeding behaviour and ecology of the Baya weaver bird. Years later, when I joined the great ornithologist as his first Ph.D. student, he suggested the ecology of the Baya Weaver in relation to agriculture as a subject. I was surprised, but the choice was correct, as we were able to show that the weaver bird was not purely a pest of crops as believed till then, but was also a potent destroyer of weeds and arthropod pests of paddy.

Dr. Sálím Ali thus laid the foundation for Economic Ornithology in India, which is

## Memories of Sálím Ali

D.N. Mathew

now a well established branch of study in agricultural universities. He had been pleading for such studies for 30 years since 1936. Our guide was more interested in the living bird and its ecology rather than in stuffed specimens in the museum!

Dr. Sálím Ali taught us the art of improvisation. During the bird migration camps, he carried the heavy poles required for fixing mistnets himself. He would visit these nets periodically and ensure that nobody hurt the birds or damaged the mistnets with such destructive weapons as fingernails or shirt buttons — these often got entangled in the mesh of the nets! Those who made such a mistake would never repeat it, that is, if they survived the fusillade from the Chief Investigator!

Dr. Sálím Ali's writings are an object lesson in economy and good handwriting. The handwriting samples of the great biologist should be preserved in museums. Even in correcting a manuscript, Dr. Sálím Ali was sparing and inimitable. Comments were brief, written neatly in pencil or ball pen only in the margin of the text.

Dr. Sálím Ali always discouraged standing judgement on others. "How perfect are you to judge others?" he used to ask.

There was one omission which caused Sálím Ali much regret in the evening of his life. He was very close to the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and regretted that he could not use

this association to promote more effective conservation measures. His views on conservation were tempered by common sense. He clearly distinguished between *ahimsa* and wildlife conservation. His policy was "The interest on the capital must be used, while leaving the capital itself intact."

Dr. Sálím Ali was impeccable in his hospitality. Be it at 33 Pali Hill, his residence for many years, or in a remote field camp, no visitor could leave without a cup of tea. It is difficult to imagine a more courteous and methodical person than him. Even in the course of his long and strenuous journeys by jeep to camps in the field, Dr. Sálím Ali would find time to look up old friends, even retired persons living in obscurity, like N.G. Pillai and K.P.S. Menon in Kerala.

In the Rajya Sabha Dr. Sálím Ali continued his battle for conservation and the prodigal use of natural resources. When I wrote to him about the disastrous extraction of granite for export in North Kerala, Dr. Sálím Ali promptly raised the issue in the Rajya Sabha. Sadly, such activity continues even today.

Dr. Sálím Ali's simple, spotless, conservationist way of life leaves behind a rare and shining example for others to follow. His objective thinking, secular outlook, respect for others, and concern for the conservation of our fast dwindling resources are more and more relevant today, as we approach the close of this century. □

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*D. N. Mathew, Dr. Sálím Ali's first Ph.D. student, is now working at Calicut University, Calicut.*



In the winter of 1983, I was selected by the BNHS to work in the Hydrobiology Project at Bharatpur. Working for Dr. Sálím Ali in one of Asia's finest bird sanctuaries was a dream come true for me, at that time a nervous teenager eager for recognition. I had a zeal to see as many of the eight thousand odd species of birds in the world, a passion that persists unsatiated to this day. What better opportunity to augment my bird list than in Bharatpur, under the world's foremost authority on Indian birds?

A day before I left for Bharatpur, I went birding with Dr. Sálím Ali to the Guindy National Park in Madras. We chatted a great deal about the avifauna of Madras. His anecdotes were fascinating. One that stands out in my memory is about the Layard's or brown-breasted flycatcher, which occasionally passes through Guindy. He said that Layard gave the scientific name *Muscicapa muttui* to this bird, apparently to honour a servant he had, Muthu by name. It is not known if this Muthu actually collected the type specimen, or if Layard just decided to honour him for the overall field services he

# Bird walks with Sálím Ali

R. Kannan

rendered. The *Handbook* does indicate that the bird was first collected in Sri Lanka (where Muthu is a common Tamil name), but this little bit of historical information on the bird's first discovery is probably not in print anywhere.

During that walk in Guindy, Dr Sálím Ali also advised me on some of the rare birds in Bharatpur. "You need to look for the spotted creeper", I remember him saying. "You know, I have seen this bird in Bharatpur just a few times, and once I was able to film it for a while. It really is a strange species. Let me know if you find it."

The spotted grey creeper is a small, little known nuthatch-like bird of the dry forests of

Central India. No study has been done on this bird, and many aspects of its ecology and distribution remain a mystery. Inspired, I searched earnestly for the bird right from the end of 1983 through most of 1985. During that time, I kept corresponding with Dr. Sálím Ali regularly from the Ghana Bird Sanctuary. He was too busy to reply to all of my excited and detailed letters, but once in a while, to my delight, I'd get a very encouraging letter. "Keep a sharp lookout for unusual species, the spotted



A moment of introspection — Sálím Ali at Green Acres

creeper for one," ended one of his neatly typed letters.

One crisp winter morning in November 1984, I found my first spotted creeper while walking along the *Acacia*-lined dykes in the sanctuary. Paradoxically, such a rare bird was found on one of the trails that tourists use each day. The bird flew from tree to tree as I pursued it stealthily, observing all details, making sketches and writing notes with my excited and shaking hands. I wrote to Dr. Sálím Ali that very day, carefully describing the encounter in as much detail as possible.

The spotted creeper seen that day stayed more or less in the same area near the Keoladeo temple for several weeks, and was seen by scores of lucky birders that winter. It is amazing how the news of a rare bird spreads among European birders, even in a country with no rare bird hotlines. For several weeks, incoming bird enthusiasts, mostly British, contacted me for help in their quest for the bird, and very few of them went back disappointed. During this time, I was hoping that Dr. Sálím Ali would visit Bharatpur so that I could show him the bird which he was so eagerly waiting to see.

I didn't have to wait long. In the last few days of 1984, when the bird was still very much around and easily seen, I got news that the "old man" was scheduled to visit Bharatpur on a routine visit to our research station. After many frustrating delays, his visit finally materialised in January 1985. On his arrival, he was immediately swarmed upon by scores of visitors and I wondered if I'd ever get the chance to take him for our much awaited excursion to see the creeper. Such was that noble man's popularity that people of all walks of life, from the Maharaja of Bharatpur to the rickshaw pullers of the town, flocked around him with respect and affection. However, the indefatigable old man was so eager to see the bird that he set aside a time early one morning for a walk with me to find the bird.

The walk started off very well that foggy morning. For the first time since his arrival two days earlier, I had some time to spend on my own with the great ornithologist, as we walked from the temple along the *Acacia*-lined dykes that

intersect the wetlands. We saw many of the ducks Bharatpur is so famous for, and I told him about some of the unusual bird records I had made over the past few months. He listened carefully, with his head slightly cocked to one side to facilitate his hearing, asked questions and made remarks now and then as I described the bird sightings. His memory for even the most trivial detail was awesome. When I mentioned having sighted the dark grey bush chat near the Keoladeo temple, he urged me to publish it. "A British birdwatcher told me of the occurrence of the bird in Kanha several years ago", he said and remarked sadly that such important bird records are dead unless they are published. I myself spread the same word of advice these days to people who are reluctant to write papers and put records into print.

We never saw the spotted creeper that day. Just as we neared the area where the bird was found, we ran into a noisy group of tourists who recognized the great "Doctor Sahib" and crowded around him to take photographs, while the ubiquitous portable tape recorders blared loudly in the background. I sat on a stone by the dyke, unable to contain my anger and frustration. Through it all, Dr. Sálím Ali remained as affable as ever, talking to the tourists and posing for photographs. He politely eased his way through the happy and well meaning crowd, and we were on our way again, but by then the spotted creeper had vanished, probably disturbed by the noisy tourists. After scanning the *Acacia* trees around, for some time, we gave up and headed back for camp.

That birding walk which I shared with Dr Sálím Ali in the Ghana that he had helped to protect was memorable. But more lasting is the image of a patient and immensely likeable man, who, despite all his great accomplishments, was the picture of humility even when prevented by a frivolous group of person from accomplishing an important and much awaited bird quest. □

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*R. Kannan is now working at Fort Smith, Arkansas, USA, and continues to be a member of BNHS. He has often contributed to Hornbill.*

# Sálim Ali

## A Tribute

J.C. Daniel

Way back in 1951, after a hard day of field collecting for Dr. Sálim Ali's ornithological survey of the Berars, I was relaxing with him in the forest rest house at Chikalda, now part of the Tiger Project Sanctuary of Melghat in Maharashtra. I had joined the Bombay Natural History Society the previous October, and I had been brought out on a bird survey and was very much on trial. Apparently I had not been found wanting. The 'old man,' a term which was used with the greatest respect by the staff of the Society who were very fond of him but who found his unbending principles rather trying occasionally, had decided to unbend a little and we were discussing my background.

When he realized that I had been brought up in Kerala, he talked about the bird survey he had conducted in Kerala, then the States of Travancore and Cochin, in the 1930s and the people he had met. One among them was a Dr. Jivanayakam who had been secretary of a fact finding committee, which was investigating the practices, both



At Kihim in 1986 with the mentor

good and bad, of aided educational institutions. The Committee and Sálim Ali's survey party often shared the same dak bungalow and they had become friends particularly when the old man found that the other had more than a casual interest in the study of birds, though his specialization was in education.

As we talked about this person he asked me whether I knew or had heard about him. When I told him that Dr. Jivanayakam was my father he was struck dumb with amazement. As he described this incident in his autobiography, *The Fall of A Sparrow*, it was one in a million chance that he should have been working with the son of a man he had known decades earlier. I think neither my father nor I had tried to contact him or speak of this acquaintance when I was trying for the job of research assistant at the Society.

The rapport that we then struck stayed with us for the next 36 years of our association. To me, as to the many scientists who joined the Society during this period of our association, he was a father figure to be emulated, for there was little that was not good in him. His attitude towards work, for instance. He was a person who believed in striving hard when opportunities offered the chance.

In the field we had no work hours but neither had he. If we worked 14 hours it was with the knowledge that he would certainly put in 18 hours and would not be paid a penny in the bargain. He believed, as Gandhiji did, in the dignity of labour and nothing was below his dignity to handle. He agreed with Gandhiji that it is not the type of labour that gives you status and dignity but that dignity rests on your own self assessment and self-confidence.

V.C. AMBEDKAR

A great and admirable lesson that one learned working with Sálím Ali is the gravity and care necessary in the handling of money, especially public funds. The accountability not only to the donor but also to oneself, that it must be frugally spent and made to give the maximum benefit, was imprinted firmly in the minds of all his scientists and students. Nothing was said but the example was set. He had worked on shoe-string budgets throughout the major portion of his bird survey collection career, depending largely on the munificence of the now vanished species, the maharajas and princes of India. It was in their States that he did his major bird study surveys. The only assistance he had was from the BNHS which gave him the services of a skinner for the bird collection that he gave them. I do not think that except for the time he was the nature education organizer in 1927, he ever drew a salary in his life till he became a National Professor of Ornithology in the 1980s. From the grants he received from the maharajas he drew nothing but his living expenses, all the rest was ploughed back into the collection and study of his first love — the birds of the Indian subcontinent.

All the bird surveys had a target. In our Berar survey, we were specially looking for the white-fronted tree pic, a species which is now restricted to the rain-forests of Kerala, but had

once been recorded by a reliable ornithologist from Berar. The surveys along the Western Ghats, hills of central India, Bastar and Orissa looked at the discontinuous distribution of rainforest birds now restricted to the Western Ghats of the south and the forests of eastern India. He was collecting evidence for a hypothesis known as the Satpura hypothesis propounded by Dr. Hora, the then director of the Zoological Survey of India, on the route of movement of these species now existing at two corners of an India, divided by over 2,000 km of unsuitable country in between. The Hyderabad survey looked for the Jerdon's courser, a bird that was subsequently to be rediscovered in Cuddapah district by one of Sálím Ali's young field biologists. Another notable rediscovery was of Finn's baya after a period of over 50 years in the Kumaon Terai.

Sálím Ali was as active in the field of conservation as he was in ornithology. He was probably *the* person who had travelled to all the obscure regions of the Indian subcontinent at one time or other of his life and knew the country and its forest intimately. His knowledge and experience were respected, and his timely intervention saved, for instance, the Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary, now the Keoladeo National Park, and the Silent Valley National Park.

As a prelude to the magnificent ten volumes on Indian birds which he completed by 1974, almost all the surveys gave rise to a book, *The Birds of Kutch, The Birds of Travancore & Cochin*, later published as *The Birds of Kerala, The Birds of Sikkim* and *The Birds of the Eastern Himalayas*, each a popular version of the data collected by the surveys of the area. These and the ever popular *Book of Indian Birds* were to familiarize bird watching and bird study as excellent forms of relaxation in a stress-filled world.

His surveys and individual bird studies were examples of how much information can be obtained with a minimum of equipment, a notebook and pencil, a pair of binoculars and an alert, analytical mind. The precise notes he made during his bird surveys remain some of the best examples of data collecting.

It was as a teacher that Sálím Ali really excelled. The Bombay University had recognized the Society as a Research Institute in Ornithology with Dr. Sálím Ali as the research guide. His methods were innovative and the student was left to develop his own ability and initiative, with guidance subtly rendered through discussions. The bond that was so established, was in the best traditions of the Indian *guru* and *shishya* relationship. He was thus able to expand the research capabilities of the Bombay Natural History

Society when the opportunity offered.

Recognition came late to Sálím Ali but came abundantly. The Asiatic Society's gold medal for researchers in Asiatic Zoology, Padma Bhushan and later the Padma Vibhushan for continued distinction in zoology from the Government of India, the Sunderlal Hora Memorial award of the Indian National Academy of Sciences for "outstanding contributions to Indian ornithology"; The degree of D.Sc from the Universities of Aligarh, Delhi and Andhra. The Union Gold Medal of the British Ornithologists Union and several other international awards of recognition including

the Paul Getty International Prize for Wildlife Conservation.

The BNHS was very much a part of Sálím Ali's life from the time he timidly entered its portals as a small boy with a yellow throated sparrow in his hand. He was a member of the Society for over 69 years and the organization gradually became synonymous with him. It was his family and all that he cared for. To the Society he left whatever he thought was valuable in his possession.

A man with a fine natural modesty, he was humane, selfless, sensible, and with a lively sense of humour. Above all, he had what Gandhiji also had and which the Arabs call 'Baraka', the quality of being

able to bestow blessing or benediction.

Sálím Ali was a non-conformist, a man who for many years walked a lonely path divergent from the main stream of science in India. It is a tribute to his determination and genius that at the end of his life he had a sizeable population of the conformist main stream following him, or at least appreciating and commending his more or less single-handed efforts to present the study of the birds of his land, the ethereal spirits of the air, to his countrymen and to the world. □

*J.C. Daniel, former Director, BNHS is currently a member of the Executive Committee, BNHS and chairman of the Sálím Ali Wild Wings Trust.*

My memory takes me back some fifty years. I was a student at the Central College for Women, Nagpur. Our new college building was situated far from the city on Seminary Hill. It was surrounded by acres of scrubland dotted with bushes of *ber* and lantana and fringed by trees of *sal* and flame of the forest.

One day my friend and I were making our way towards the *ber* bushes, when suddenly she held me back and pointed to a large brown and black bird foraging in the undergrowth. When I asked, she said it was a crow-pheasant. A little later, she pointed out a beautiful black bird with a forked tail perched on the bare branch of a tree. We watched its sallies, every now and again, after insects. It was a king crow. I was surprised at her knowledge and asked how she could identify the birds. She told me that her father was working on a Hindi text about Indian birds and had with him a copy of the *Book of Indian Birds* by Sálím Ali. Straight away, I bought a copy for myself. Glancing through its pages, I was hooked. I took the book wherever I went and was thrilled when I could identify a

## ENCOUNTERS WITH THE BIRD MAN

bee-eater, a babbler or a blue jay. Smaller birds hidden in the foliage were, of course, not so easy to spot. To entice them, I set up a bird-table in the shrubbery of our garden and laid it out with fruits and grains every morning. Soon I was rewarded with sightings of several common garden birds like the bulbul, sunbird and the tailor bird. The highlight was the day I spotted the paradise flycatcher — a magnificent, silvery white male with black-crested head and two long ribbon-like feathers in its tail. Over the years this interest, aroused by a beautiful book, grew into a fascinating hobby.

Several decades later, a documentary film producer asked me to write the English commentary for a film he had made on Dr. Sálím Ali. Needless to say, I was thrilled at the idea. We went to meet the great man at his home in Bandra. I was somewhat nervous as to

what he would think of my little effort. But I needn't have worried. I found him to be a very unassuming person, simple and modest, unaffected by the international acclaim or the several honours heaped upon him. On my second visit, I hesitantly requested him to autograph my rather battered *Bird Book*. With a twinkle in his eye he wrote: "Glad to see it so well used over the years." Since then, I have acquired several of his books, but this is one of my most cherished possessions. Many years later I met him again at Kihim. I did not expect him to remember me, but he recalled my visit and asked how the birdwatching was getting on.

Several eminent and learned men have written about Dr. Sálím Ali's contribution to India's natural history, especially in the fields of Ornithology and Conservation. This is just a small personal tribute to a great man, who opened my eyes to the wonderful birds that, to transpose Wordsworth, "flash upon the inward eye, which is the bliss of solitude."

— Panna Raiji

# Sálím Ali Bird Count

The Sálím Ali Bird count is held on a Sunday or a holiday closest to 12th November, Dr. Sálím Ali's birthday. It gives a purpose to laymen and professionals alike to move into the outdoors and look beyond the confines of their homes. Such cooperative efforts have been very successful elsewhere, viz. U.K. where the British Trust for Ornithology has been successfully running a nest record scheme and a Common Birds Census. The Audubon Bird Count is an annual exercise in North America.

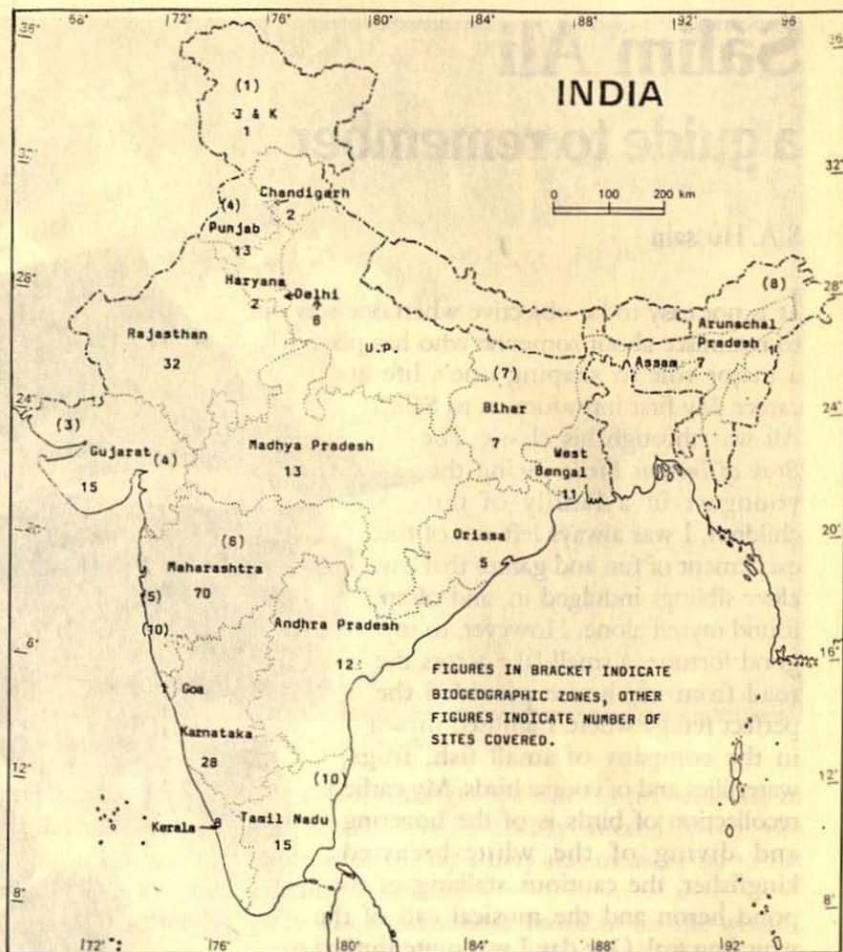
Conservation movements worldwide, were initiated by ornithologists. The International Council of Bird Preservation (ICBP), founded 1922, was the first truly international organisation in the field of conservation. In India too, the first conservationists were birdwatchers, like A.O. Hume, Stuart Baker and Dr Sálím Ali.

Dr. Sálím Ali first raised the issue of Conservation of natural resources and placed it on the agenda of the Central and State governments. The Wildlife Protection Act (1972), which is based on the Bombay Wild Games Act (1951), was pioneered by a dedicated ornithologist Mr. Humayun Abdulali, whose intimate understanding of the game laws and their implications was utilised by the Government to draft a new set of laws for the country. The act served as a model for the Indian Wildlife Protection Act (1972). It was again at the urging of ornithologists like Dr. Salim Ali, that the Indian Board for Wildlife was set up in 1953. The Keoladeo National Park and the Silent Valley are a

testimony to his dedication.

In 1993 the first year, about 4000 forms were despatched to participants, while in 1994, 5000 and during 1995, 7000 forms were despatched. The sites covered by the participants represented 9 out of the 10 biogeographic zones and 17 out of the 25 biotic provinces. This birdcount is an attempt towards organising the data on bird diversity and distribution, and identifying areas where conservation action must be initiated on a priority basis. Concerned citizens and BNHS members will thus form a **Conservation Action Network** and help to record the rapid changes being brought about in bird habitats by unplanned Urbanization and Industrialization. □

Compiled by S.Asad Akhtar, Conservation Officer, BNHS.

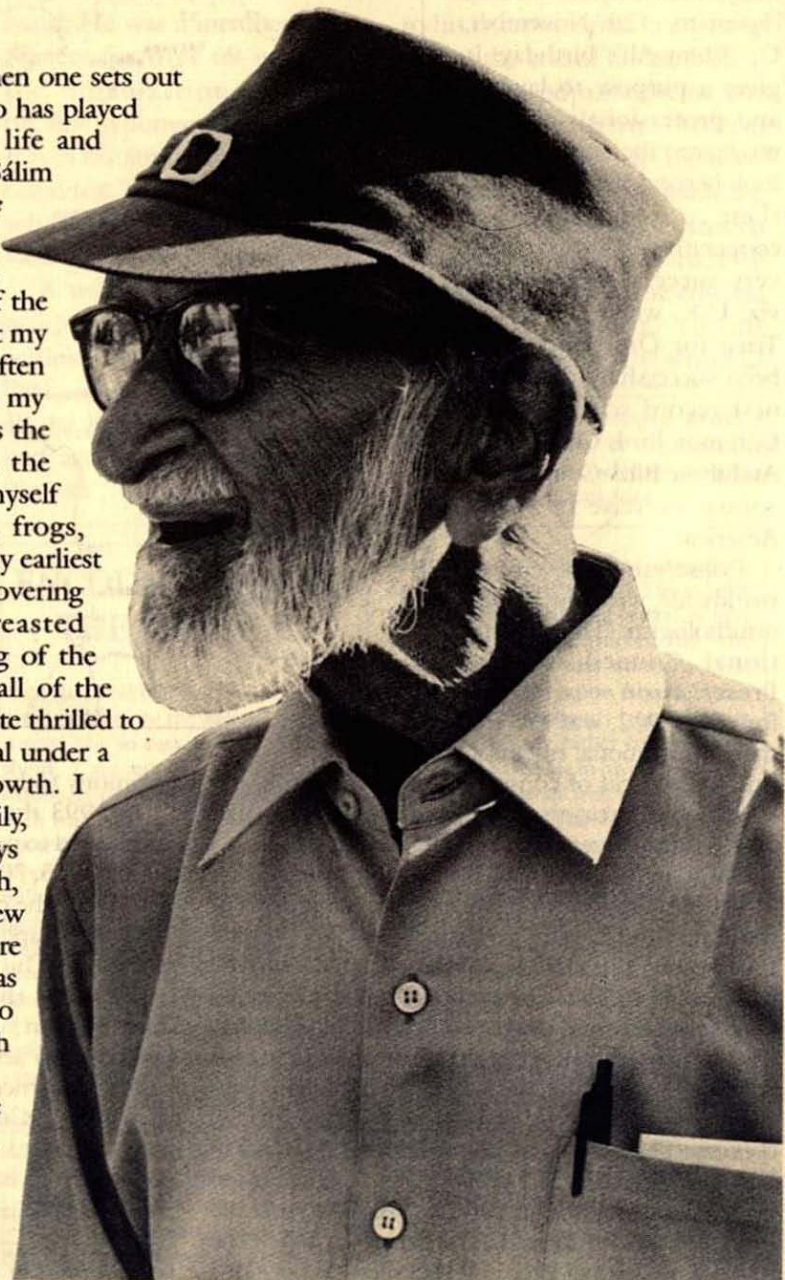


# Sálim Ali

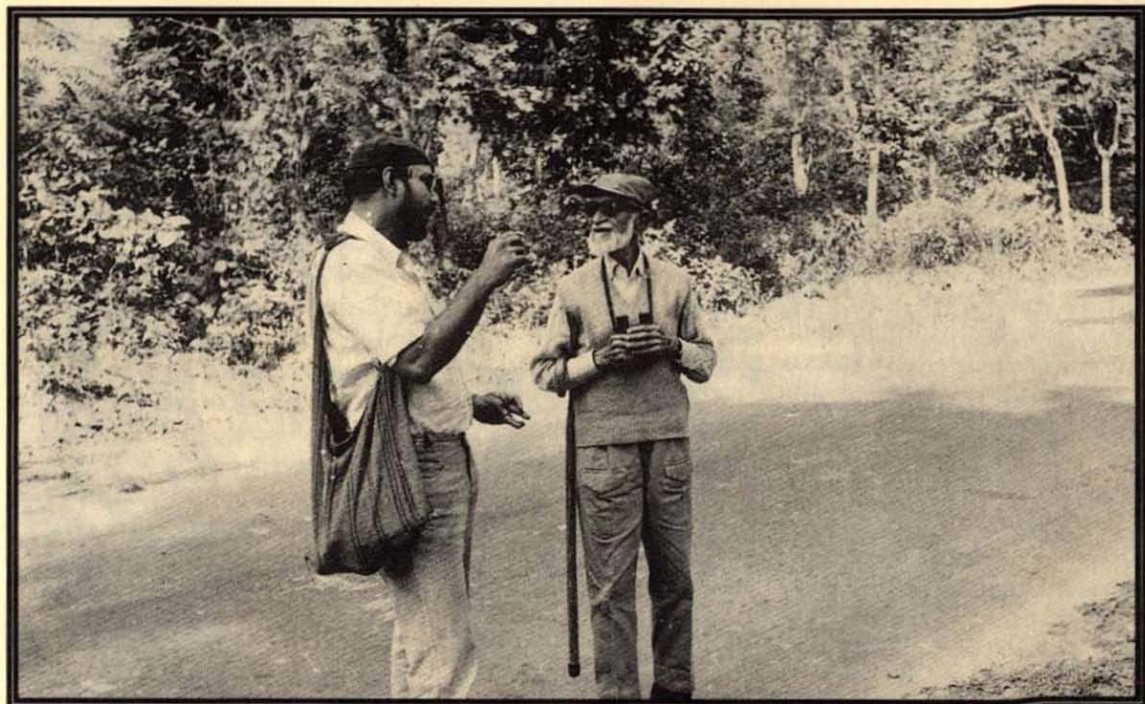
## a guide to remember

S.A. Hussain

It is not easy to be objective when one sets out to reminisce about someone who has played a major role in shaping one's life and career. My first introduction to Sálim Ali was through his classic *The Book of Indian Birds*. Being the youngest in a family of ten children, I was always left out of the excitement of fun and games that my elder siblings indulged in, and often found myself alone. However, to my good fortune, a small lake across the road from my house provided the perfect refuge where I amused myself in the company of small fish, frogs, waterlilies and of course birds. My earliest recollection of birds is of the hovering and diving of the white-breasted kingfisher, the cautious stalking of the pond heron and the musical call of the whistling teal. One day I was quite thrilled to discover a floating nest of the teal under a thick, bushy *Pandanus* overgrowth. I followed the progress of the family, which, fortunately for me, always kept to the margins of the bush, providing me with a ring-side view of the proceedings. Binoculars were a novelty in those days and I was too small to possess one. I was too shy to discuss my discoveries with my peers for fear of ridicule. It was a few years later that I came across a copy of Sálim Ali's *Bird Book*. I was puzzled to read that the whistling teal nests in tree holes! Once again the fear of being ridiculed kept me from



T.N.A. PERUMAL



At Madhuban National Park, Bangladesh in December 1980

mentioning my secret "discovery" to anyone, but resolved to meet Sálím Ali some day and ask him about the mystery of the whistling teal nest.

My chance to meet Sálím Ali came for the first time when I was selected to join the Society's Bird Migration Project in 1969. Four of us new recruits were waiting to be introduced to him in the Society's specimen collection rooms. As he walked in with J. C. Daniel who introduced us, he eyed us rather sternly and with a characteristic shake of his head remarked, "Well... let us see how long this bunch will last!.. I could not pick up enough courage to confront him with my little secret about teal nests. Soon after that brief encounter, we were despatched to our field stations and I did not see him for some time.

My next encounter with him came about three months later, in the BNHS field camp at Point Calimere in south India. By that time we had been suitably conditioned by our seniors with tales of Sálím Ali's strict regimen, likes and dislikes and the devastating effects of his explosive temper. My excitement at not only meeting him,

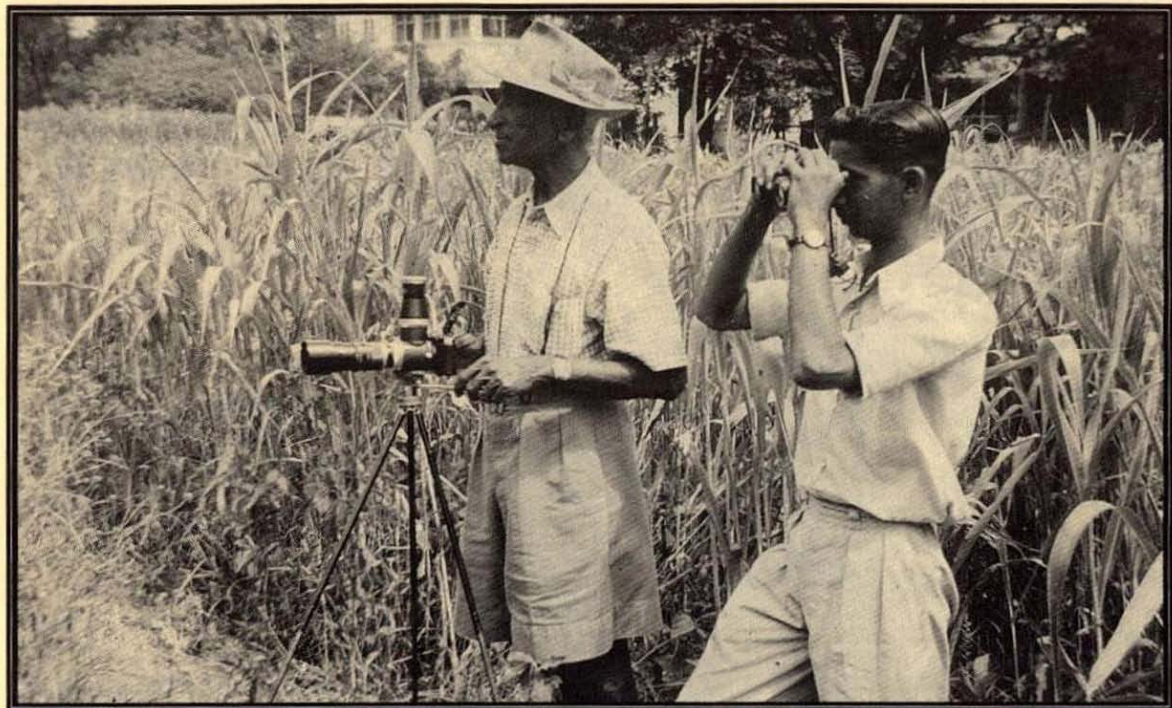
but also spending a few days in his company in the field, was suitably mixed with the apprehension that I may not measure up to his exacting standards.

It was a memorable moment for me when I was asked to drive him to the rest house late in the evening on the day of his arrival. That trip was a disaster. Almost everything I did during that short trip was wrong and I was roundly told off several times — either I drove too fast or too slow, took corners badly and to cap it all, left the parking lights of the jeep on while I helped him to settle him in his room.

Things did not get any better during the rest of the week. It seemed to me that our best efforts to handle birds in his presence turned out as if we were actually torturing them, our handwriting suddenly looked terrible and we were almost always late for everything. I thought it was the end of my career!

During my formative years at BNHS, I learnt that one has to wait patiently and diligently to be accepted by the inner circle. Sálím Ali strictly





The guru with his first *shishya* V.C. Ambedkar

went by seniority in bestowing his confidence on his *chelas*. All your offerings, whether it was a report on a field trip, some observation on bird behaviour or even a piece of general information, were treated sceptically unless corroborated by a trusted senior. Flamboyancy and showmanship by students and staff were frowned upon. Any excessive attempt to create an impression would be cut short with a severely caustic remark. Any written material sent to him would be meticulously and drastically pruned to one third of its length and substance. Frugality and simplicity was his motto — whether it was food, talk or thought.

Only two of that motley bunch of 1969 recruits withstood the baptism by fire. I was fortunate to be one of them. I don't know how I managed to pass muster, though I do not think I did anything brilliant. My handwriting is still clumsy and even now I commit a few silly mistakes. Over the years I seem to have picked up this obsession about being punctual, reaching before the appointed time and fretting about

delays, though there is nothing one can do about them. I have learnt that by being reticent, one can avoid exposing one's ignorance. I have somehow learnt that it is safer to be sure of one's facts than to flaunt one's knowledge.

Somewhere along the way, during my innings with BNHS, I was gradually accepted into the inner circle. The yardstick that measured our acceptance related to the extent to which Dr. Sálím Ali trusted you with his personal effects. His jeep, gun and cameras were sacrosanct and no one dared handle them carelessly — that is, if one was allowed to handle them at all.

Another memorable event came sometime in 1972 when I was asked to accompany him to Baroda. I was to be co-driver in his jeep — the now famous Willys black maria. I was thrilled to be accepted, to actually drive his car on a long journey. I was quite relieved that he did not criticise my driving, except by exhorting me to go faster than I dared to in his presence. Even when the bonnet of the jeep flew up at 100 kmph, blocking the wind shield, he calmly told me to

slow down and pull up. I was expecting a storm to break when we got down to pull back the bonnet. Instead, he merely asked the attendant to unpack the lunch box to eat under a great roadside banyan tree. Apparently he had had the same experience with the bonnet several times and lamented the shoddy handiwork of Bombay mechanics!

I think my most memorable moments were during the 1972 Bhutan expedition with Sálím Ali and S. Dillon Ripley. At one point the expedition was split into two parties. While the Ripleys went up to higher altitudes accompanied by my senior colleague Robert Grubh, I was to help Sálím Ali who stayed back. I think it was there that I had the opportunity to come very close to him. Not only was I allowed to use his gun, but also his Leica and cine cameras! The ultimate moment came when he actually allowed me to share the only room available at the remote Border Roads Organisation guest house, and nonchalantly announced that he would turn his "deaf ear" to shut off my snoring. I was rather apprehensive about my fate the next morning, since my own loud snoring was a well-known fact in the camp. Perhaps he suffered my snoring quietly or he did not hear it at all, but he burst out laughing when I told him next morning that I had been disturbed by his snoring!

After that I was a constant companion to him in all his expeditions and trips in India. There was perfect rapport between us, particularly when sharing a joke or making a comment on something or someone. I discovered that though he was rather strict in the standards he set for himself and his *chelas*, he was rather liberal with others and even gullible to a fault. He could be taken in easily with sweet and well chosen words. His simplicity and almost childlike inquisitive nature was often exploited by clever ones to gain his confidence. However, he would never suffer fools.

Everyone who has met or worked with Sálím Ali has personal experiences and a special relationship to relate. Sincerity, dedication, perseverance, meticulousness, simplicity, perfection, intolerance of shoddiness and

insincerity, these are some of the traits everyone associates with Sálím Ali. At the other end of the spectrum are his highly inflammable temper, impatience, ruthless discipline and devastating sarcasm, intended mostly to puncture inflated egos.

Three of these traits — two positive and one negative — have made a lasting impression on me. First and foremost was his latent sense of humour which slipped in very subtly during conversation, whose connotations were often missed by the uninitiated. Only a few could detect that mischievous glint in his eyes when the humour was harmless, or the deadpan expression when it was deadly.

The second trait amongst those that I admired most was his mastery over the English language. During a casual conversation he once mentioned to me how EHA (E.H. Aitken) used to struggle to write his brilliant essays, which have an apparently effortless flowing style. Sálím Ali's writings have the same effect due to his slow, meticulous and exacting word-craft. The best tribute paid to him on this count was perhaps in the review of his *Handbook* in the *Ibis*, the journal of the British Ornithologists' Union.

Very few are aware of the negative trait. Only those who have worked with him very closely in the field have experienced this. Except in the cases of grave illness or accident, he had little or no sympathy or feeling for anyone who fell sick, particularly during field work. This was because of his anxiety that the work on hand would be affected. I once had the unenviable task of managing five team members who were down with malaria, and a highly irritable Sálím Ali, during an expedition to the Andaman Islands. Sheer survival instinct must have made me immune to an attack of malaria myself!

I never did manage to ask Sálím Ali about the "mystery" of the whistling teal nest. But what I gained by just being with him was true guidance for me for the rest of my life. □

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*S.A. Hussain, a former BNHS scientist, is currently working in Malaysia.*

# In camp with Sálim Ali

ZAFAR FUTEHALLY

Soon after my marriage in 1943, Sálim Ali, who was my wife's uncle, invited us to spend a few days with him in Balaram, the lovely forest reserve of the erstwhile state of Palanpur. The era of nawabs and maharajas was not a bad one for nature conservation. The people may have been kept out of the forests, and their inherent right to make use of forest resources may have been trampled underfoot, but nature certainly flourished. Balaram was a glorious example of a natural forest — not a man-made one — where the roar of the tiger and the sawing of the panther could be heard from the rest house. Sálim had organised this camp for collecting birds and to get more scientific information on the avifauna of Gujarat. The 'nawabi' arrangements of the

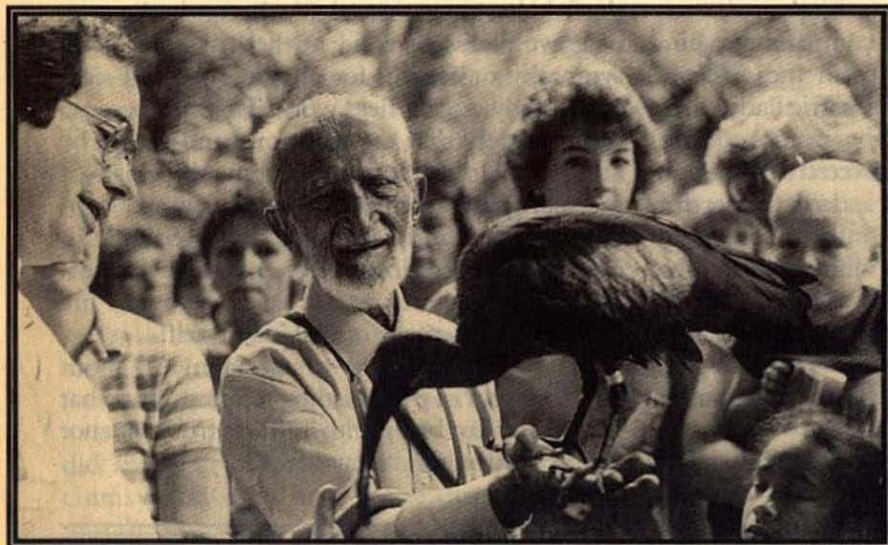
camp made it pleasant. There was a host of servants with saffron coloured turbans running around, but I recall Sálim's annoyance at their inefficient ways — "Much ado about nothing", he used to say. The Nawab's Chevrolet station wagon never started with the self starter, and needed a lot of pushing and coaxing for which the horde of servants was crucial. Knowing my interest in horse riding, Sálim requested the Nawab to provide me with a mount, and soon a very well trained animal arrived.

One rather grotesque structure in Palanpur is difficult to forget. It was a high tower with a water tank at the top, so that the Viceroy, when he came for a shoot, would not be short of water to flush the sanitary system!

In camp with us was Gabriel, the taxidermist-cum-collector of the BNHS. His job was to help Sálim collect selected birds for the BNHS Reference Collection. But frequently Gabriel came back with bulbuls and such like and said "What to do Sir, no good good birds, so I said take man, what to do". "No good good birds" became a refrain in many of Sálim's collecting camps.

Camp is a fine place to get to know a man. We found that Sálim was extraordinarily methodical in everything he did. When out in the jungle he had his little notebook in which he used to enter some stenographic signs, which were meant to be elaborated upon later. But even here, while on the move, there was no untidy scribbling. His clear and elegant handwriting can be seen in these temporary notebooks. On returning to camp, the notes were expanded in his field diary.

"Never trust your memory", he told me, "a gap of even a few minutes



Friend of the birds — Sálim Ali

between an observation and its recording can lead to distortions". It is, I suppose, because of these direct and instantly recorded observations that his writings are so accurate.

He was methodical not only in ornithology but in everything that he did. Perhaps he overdid a few things, such as the *Bazaar Book* and the *hisaab* or household accounts from the cook, which were meticulously entered even in the days when a few annas procured all the "sabzi" for the day. I recall that there was a seething dissatisfaction in one camp where the staff who worked extremely hard from dawn to dusk were rebuked rather brutally if they complained about the unchanging menu of dal, rice and curds, with a banana on high days. However, because of his genuine interest in the welfare of the staff, these troubles were soon forgotten, and the respect which he aroused among his underlings and colleagues is well known.

The same deliberate care was extended to everything from checking the air pressure of the jeep's tyres every morning, to the manner of loading it. On one trip the jeep was stuck in the sandy bed of a dry river, and many hours and much labour had to be expended to set it moving. From then on Sálím always carried a roll of wire mesh which was laid down wherever a patch of loose soil had to be crossed.

Indian ornithology should be grateful to the WHO for having initiated the Bird Migration programme. I was lucky to be present in the first camp in Kutch in the early sixties when Dr. Schifferli from the Sempach Bird Centre in Switzerland was sent to teach Indians the technique of catching birds in Japanese mist nets, for ringing, without damaging them. By now



"Good-good" Gabriel at the wheel of the station wagon gifted by Loke Wan Tho

many of us who have handled these nets and the birds know that it is an exacting task, and removing birds from the nets has to be done extremely systematically, otherwise they get entangled inextricably. In Kutch an added problem was caused by sand flies which are an annoyance of the highest order. You need both your hands flapping around your face to keep away this menace. And when both hands were employed to remove the birds, I found the flies quite unbearable. But Sálím ignored the sand flies and made some cutting remarks about people like me who were incapable of putting up with such, according to him, minor annoyances.

In one of the camps in Kutch, Loke Wan Tho arrived. Loke, one of Sálím's most intimate friends, as well as his quite remarkable moral and financial supporter, had many common interests with him. Both were very fond of good literature, and in camp, after a gruelling day's work, they sat around reading aloud from some anthology or other. Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* was a particular favourite.

One of my most pleasant recollections of camp life with Sálím was in Kuar Bet in Kutch, where as the sun went down the jackals began their chorus. Those of us who have heard it will know how thrilling it is. Though the pitch and the tune

is varied, the howling is instantly recognisable. According to some naturalists, the chorus of jackals in the early years of this century could be heard throughout the length and breadth of India at sunset, because it is an animal so well adapted to so many habitats. This music, alas, is rarely heard now, for wilderness is on the wane.

In the middle sixties, I spent a few days with Sálím in a camp in Bhutan. Peter Jackson, another great friend, had come to help with the collecting but primarily, of course, to enjoy himself. The scale of the logging going on in Bhutan was most distressing. It was amazing to see how quickly a forested tract could be laid low. A few hard strokes with the axe at the right place made the tree fall exactly where the logger intended, and we saw some of the steepest slopes being totally denuded. It was instant destruction of the landscape — and we naturalists watched it with horror. The other thing that I remember rather painfully about

Bhutan are the nettles. Obviously nature intended its vegetation to be saved from marauding animals, but unfortunately, man is able to circumvent protective adaptations.

The most striking birds of Bhutan are the white-headed laughing thrushes. Not only do they look so impressive with their white crests, but their explosive laughter is a delightful experience. I tried to render the effect of the chorus rather amateurishly in vernacular as “re re re marigio marigio”, and I see that this has been reproduced in the Handbook as the call of these birds.

I was lucky to have an open invitation to join any of Sálím's camps for as long as I wished. In many ways, it was the best education I could have had. □

Zafar Futehally was Honorary Secretary, BNHS and continues to be a life member. He resides in Bangalore, from where he publishes Newsletter for Birdwatchers, the bimonthly bulletin of the Bird Watchers' Field Club of India.

## INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY

I met Sálím Ali at the Oxford University Press function in Bombay to release the BNHS *Encyclopaedia of Natural History*. I knew he was gravely ill. So I was rather relieved to see him looking trim and relaxed in a beige and khaki outfit. He wore heavy-soled shoes and the only unfamiliar accoutrement was the largish walking stick he carried. When I asked him about his health he smiled and said ‘Oh, they keep giving me all these drugs...’ And that was that. Not a word more. Soon he was engrossed in conversation about the birds one could still see in Bombay. I told him about the red spurfowl I sometimes saw in the jungle bordering the Borivili National Park at Mulund where I live. He was so pleased he said, ‘Shabash!’ The resilience of birdlife in the urban nightmare of Bombay deserves a medal. I have seen the Indian pitta, the three-toed forest kingfisher and the silver-headed mynah in the heart of busy Bombay. But these are chance encounters. On the whole slowly and steadily birds are being squeezed out of the city with the march of concrete.

As we spoke I marvelled at Sálím Ali's own resilience. And yet I felt a faint sense of disquiet; as I thought about the Old Man's enormous experience and wisdom of a lifetime, I thought of

the absurd waste of it all when it would be obliterated. Couldn't we have some super-geographic means to hang on to these ‘learned fields’? I realize I am not the first nor the last to speculate on the intimations of mortality.

Earlier, we had decided to interview Sálím Ali, to provide a sequel to his autobiographical *Fall of a Sparrow*. When I asked about this, for the first time Sálím Ali sounded regretful, ‘I wish I'd started this much much earlier. Nowadays I just cannot.’

We decided to meet at Kihim, where Sálím Ali had retired from his lodgings at Bombay. I looked forward to the meeting. Still, I felt a sense of intrusion. Despite my journalistic prompting for a ‘major’ interview conducted on the wind-swept locale of Kihim, I felt we should not really be disturbing the Old Man. Sálím Ali had assured us that we would be more than welcome, so it was my own attenuated sense of decorum that made me pass up the appointment. I wish I'd met him. I'd perhaps have discharged some of my share of the debt of posterity. I knew Sálím Ali had. His books are proof enough. □

Vithal C. Nadkarni, a member of BNHS, is Assistant Editor, *Times of India*, Bombay.

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## Sálim Ali on killing birds and shikar

In my later days it has somehow been generally taken for granted that because I like birds I am bound to be revolted by the thought of anyone killing a bird, leave alone thinking of killing a bird myself. This assumption is far from correct, and it sometimes puts me in embarrassing situations. It is true that I despise purposeless killing, and regard it as an act of vandalism deserving the severest condemnation. But my love of birds is not of the sentimental variety. It is essentially aesthetic and scientific, and in some cases may even be pragmatic. For a scientific approach to bird study it is often necessary to sacrifice a few. I do not enjoy the killing, and sometimes even suffer a prick of conscience, but I have no doubt that but for the methodical collecting of specimens in my earlier years—several thousands, alas—it would have been impossible to advance our taxonomical knowledge of Indian birds—as the various regional surveys have done—nor indeed of their geographical distribution, ecology and bionomics.

White-winged wood duck  
extinct ?



However, I believe a stage has now been reached when the *ad hoc* collecting of Indian bird specimens is no longer essential, except for special studies such as moult, or in the case of a few remote and unexplored pockets of the country, or of a few little-known species that are rare in museum collections. There is sufficient research material available in the BNHS, the Zoological Survey of India, and the great natural history museums abroad, for solving most taxonomical problems. □

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## Sálim Ali on S.H. Prater

My admiration and regard for Prater's intellectual versatility was profound. Though perhaps he cannot claim any original contribution to science, he read voraciously and managed to keep himself abreast of all the latest developments in natural history... Indeed this was Prater's forte—the popularization of zoological knowledge. Most of his writings bear witness to his mastery of the art. For our zoology practicals at St. Xavier's we had to work in pairs, and I well remember how convenient it was for me to

use him as the working partner whenever unsavoury jobs, such as dissecting a cockroach, had to be performed. It was a sincere regret to me—and later I suspect also to himself—that with Independence Prater allowed himself to be virtually stampeded to emigrate out of India by an irrationally panicked wife and doubting Anglo-Indian friends. I have a conviction that he never really felt at home in England, having being born and having spent the major part of his life in India. In unguarded moments one could sense his longing to be back among the people and surroundings with which he was more familiar... □



On Houseboat Pandora in Kashmir, 1951, on a bird photography trip with Loke Wan Tho

## Loke Wan Tho

Loke, his mother and younger sister, Peng, were forced to flee Singapore and seek refuge in India, at Bombay. In the course of the escape, on I think, a Dutch ship, Loke was subjected to a number of harrowing experiences which nearly cost him his life... Gibson asked Loke how he proposed to occupy his time during his exile, and what his special interests were, so that he could help with suggestions. On learning that one of Loke's particular passions—apart from English literature and writing—was bird watching and bird photography, Gibson promised to put him in touch with a bird-watching friend, meaning me. The dinner meeting in Gibson's naval quarters a few days later proved mutually momentous and providential for both the guests. It brought me quite fortuitously in touch with a most unusual and lovable character and marked the beginning of a friendship which, through a close identity of outlook and interests, grew in depth and understanding over the years, right until his tragic death in an air crash in 1964. For Wan Tho that

meeting with me and his consequent introduction to the BNHS also proved a blessing. Both the Society and I continued to profit from his grateful munificence... In the twenty-two years that this inestimable friendship flourished there was hardly a birding expedition, international bird conference or bird photographing holiday which Loke did not share with me personally or with munificent financial support. Later on he maintained that in this way he derived

almost as much vicarious satisfaction as from personal participation.....

In the course of the next four months in Kutch I had ample opportunity to test his capacity for spartan living—for putting up cheerfully with the rough-and-ready existence which low-budget bird surveys involved—living completely off the land, sometimes in bug-ridden *dharamsalas* with loud throat-clearing pilgrims, or maybe tumble-down cowsheds. On such expeditions there was *dal* and rice for lunch and rice and *dal* for dinner, with light provided by smoky hurricane lanterns, and there were sundry other tiresome deprivations then particularly necessitated by Hitler's war. Though at that time I had no inkling whatever of Loke's social status or life-style back in his Singapore homeland, it was obvious that he was unused to such privations, and all credit to him that he bore them seemingly joyfully and with such good humour. Never in all the time we lived together in the field on more or less this pattern in Kutch, and off and on for two or three years thereafter, did he once complain or grumble about the prevailing discomforts, nor drop a hint about his patrician life-style in his own country

before being forced out by the Japanese. Outwardly he seemed to enjoy and thrive on these discomforts as though to the manner born; except I realize that with the chronic dysentery he was uncomplainingly suffering from all the time, it can't have been fun running out in the open in the middle of the night looking for a bush!

Wan Tho passed the initial test in Kutch with flying colours. I was happy to discover in him a truly kindred spirit and dedicated co-worker, ever ready to pull his weight and more under all circumstances. His keen sense of humour, unfailing courtesy and quiet good manners, friendly disposition and capacity to mix at all levels, and to remain cheerful and unruffled under a leader not famous for sweetness of temper, made him an ideal adjunct to our field camps. During his forced exile in India, the countrywide regional bird surveys gave him a god-sent opportunity to indulge his passion for natural history and the out-of-doors, and devote his entire time and energy to ornithology and bird photography—and in this he came to be regarded a maestro.

Wan Tho was a great lover of English literature, with a connoisseur's sense of appreciation and criticism. This made him a charming and stimulating companion in camp, when all the mundane chores of the day were over and we sat reading after dinner in the light of a couple of miserable hurricane lanterns.

Most of our shifting from camp to camp across the country had to be done, as in the Hyderabad survey, by privately owned converted buses, usually tired veterans and invariably overloaded. Petrol was scarce and strictly rationed during wartime so that most such jalopies had been converted to run on charcoal gas. When an incline became too steep for the engine to manage on its own, all able-bodied passengers were expected to get out and push. Wan Tho always entered into the spirit of this game with gusto, but on one particularly hot and sultry midday, scrambling back into the bus still panting from an extra vigorous exertion, he casually said 'Sálim, you

should really have a station wagon of your own for this sort of work. You will then be independent of all this trouble and can load up your baggage and equipment whenever you wish and go off wherever and equipment whenever you wish and go off wherever and whenever you like.' The argument seemed flawless. I agreed with him entirely, but conditions at the time being what they were, financially and otherwise, thought no more about it until most pleasantly reminded of it a few months later.

Japan had lost the war; Shonan had been reconverted to Singapore as of old, and the widely scattered exiles were being fast herded and repatriated to the island by the British government in order to rehabilitate its disrupted trade and industry in the shortest possible time. Wan Tho, who was among the first batch of businessmen selected for return, had greatly feared that his business would have been completely ruined and that he would need to start it all over afresh. It was the pleasantest surprise of his life to find that, thanks to his Chinese manager's tact and sagacity, the business had actually thrived during the Japanese occupation and that he himself was one of the wealthiest men in Singapore once more! Announcing this joyfully in one of his first letters to me after his return, he casually reminded me of that long uphill bus push in Madhya Pradesh and what he had 'philosophized' to me on the occasion about a station wagon for my field work, adding 'I enclose a cheque: buy yourself a suitable station wagon; and remember there is more where this came from in case this much doesn't suffice.'

True to his ancestral Chinese tradition Wan Tho had an eye for beauty—beautiful mountains and natural scenery, beautiful flowers and birds, beautiful pictures, beautiful porcelain, beautiful everything else, not excluding beautiful women in whom, indeed, he was somewhat of a connoisseur! They were important enough always to find mention in his diary wherever encountered. □

Extracts from *Fall of a Sparrow*.  
Courtesy: Oxford Univ. Press.



## Sálim Ali on E.P. Gee

After retirement from a long innings of tea planting in Assam, E.P. Gee—a 'chronic' bachelor—settled down in Shillong where he assembled one of the finest private orchid collections in Assam, mostly taken in the wild by himself. As a young planter he had been an exceedingly keen sportsman-naturalist and an inveterate fisherman, which he remained to the end...

During World War II Gee had volunteered for service and, since he was used to handling a large plantation labour force, he was assigned to the Pioneer Corps to supervise the building of one section of the famous Burma Road. As it happened, and unbeknown to either, there was another man of the same name supervising a different section of the road a few miles further on, and the superior officers were constantly getting confused between the two Gees. So, since our Gee was rather fond of talking, they aptly dubbed him 'Chatter-Gee'!

In 1961, I was prospecting for suitable ringing sites in the eastern Himalaya for the BNHS's Bird Migration Project.... Gee cheerfully offered

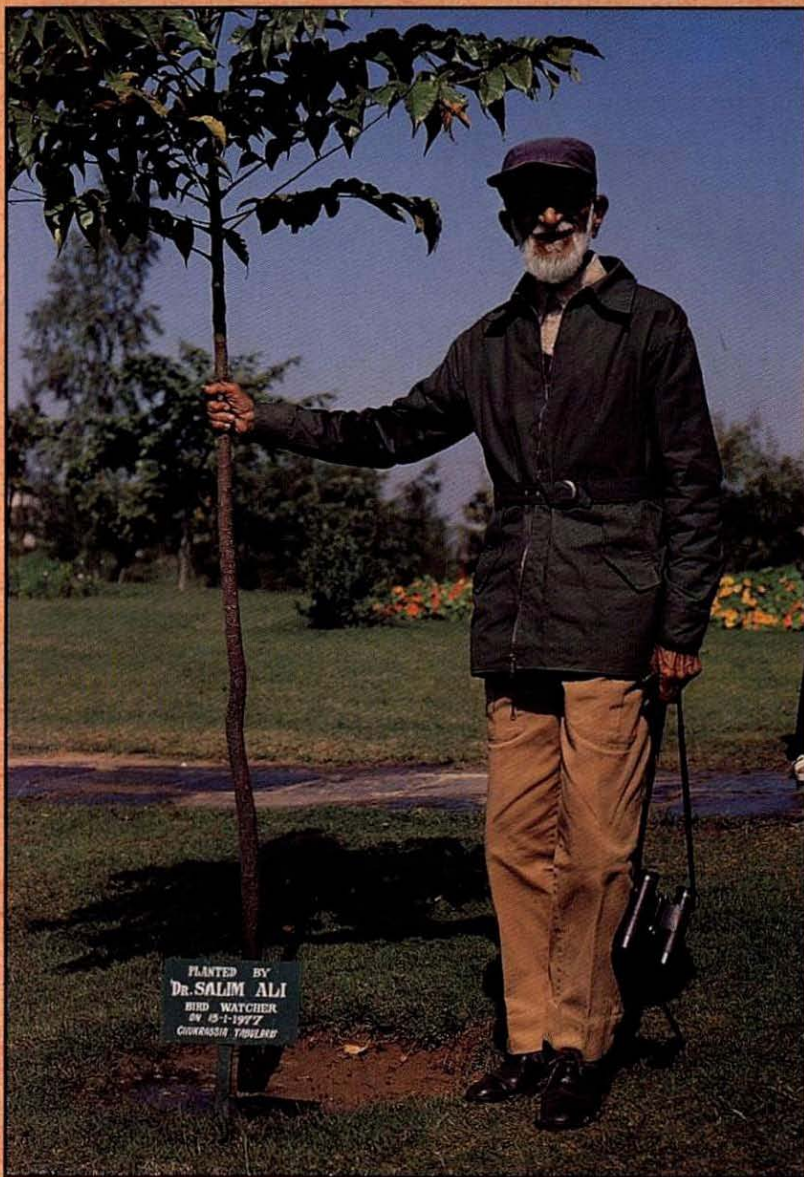
to accompany me on a reconnaissance. Before the perforated steel sheet-covered airstrip was laid down during the war, the journey to Tuting from the political headquarters at Pasighat took fourteen days of foot-slogging up and down through thickly forested steeply mountainous country: now it took us just forty minutes by an austere stripped supply plane, as we perched upon sacks of rice and *dal* and *ata*, with drums of kerosene, petrol and oil as fellow-passengers, and a few live goats—mutton on hoof—for good measure. Flying with the doors of the elderly and somewhat tired Dakota wide open, with the wind gushing through, and looking straight down on an endless succession of peaks, ridges and awesome gorges thousands of feet below was a thrilling experience, even though the gigantic snow-covered mountains flanking the route through narrow valley corridors sometimes did seem much too close to the wing-tips for peace of mind! End of November was of course too late for seeing the autumn migration here, but, in any case, the remoteness and logistic hurdles would make tinging at Tuting an impractical proposition for the BNHS.

Just a few weeks after our visit to Tuting the Chinese dragon overran the area in our first border war...□



With Jawaharlal Nehru and E.P. Gee at Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi

BELINDA WRIGHT



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**For details contact the Hon. Secretary, BNHS**