

Throughout he maintained the most meticulous records and distilled his knowledge into a series of superbly written and illustrated books; beginning in 1941 with the *Book of Indian Birds*, followed by the *Birds of Kutch*, *Indian Hill Birds*, *Birds of Kerala*, *Birds of Sikkim*, and culminating in his magnum opus, the ten volume *Handbook of Birds of India and Pakistan*. His last book, the *Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern Himalayas* was published in 1977. It is these books that have been sold many times over and will undoubtedly continue to be printed and reprinted for decades to come, that have instilled a love of natural history in a section of India's educated classes, who have otherwise been singularly insensitive to the charms of tropical nature that surrounds them. For the books are not only scientifically accurate; they make for immensely pleasurable reading; Sálím Ali was not only a great naturalist, he was a man of sparkling wit and a master of the English

language as well.

Sálím Ali was a true aristocrat, a scion of the famous Badurddin Tyabji family, a personal friend of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, a Padma Bhushan, a Member of Rajya Sabha, a Fellow of many scientific Academies and a winner of numerous prizes in science and conservation. But above all, he will be remembered as the man who taught Indians to appreciate, to study at first hand, to treasure, to work towards conserving the rich living heritage of the country.

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1. Ali, Sálím, *The Fall of a Sparrow*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1985, pp. 265.
  2. Shrader-Frechette, K. S. and McCoy E. D., *Method in Ecology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 328.
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## Sálím Ali — A tribute\*

*J. C. Daniel*

Way back in 1951, after a hard day of field collecting for Dr Sálím 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 good and bad, of aided educational institutions. The Committee and Sálím 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.

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,

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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 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 pie, a species which is now restricted to the rainforests 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 2000 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 and 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 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 late 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.