

## Sálim Ali

(12 November 1896 – 20 June 1987)

*Madhav Gadgil*

Sálim Moizuddin Abdul Ali was unquestionably the greatest whole organism biologist of 20th Century India. His insightful observations of bird life straddled most of the century, for the earliest of these were recorded in 1907 when he was all of eleven years old. They read: 'The cock sparrow perched on the nail near the entrance to the hole while female sat inside on the eggs. I ambushed them from behind a stabled carriage and shot the male. In a very short while the female acquired another male who also sat 'on guard' on the nail outside. In next 7 days I shot 8 male sparrows from this perch. Each time the female seemed to have another male in waiting who immediately stepped into the gap of the deceased husband.'

Sálim Ali learnt about birds, not from books, nor from musty specimens in museums, but through practice; by watching them at first hand, and in days before anybody thought of conservation, by ambushing them, and shooting them for the pot. It was just such a sparrow he shot the next year, when he was twelve, that turned out to be a different species, a yellow throated sparrow (*Petronia xanthocollis*), which brought him in contact with Bombay Natural History Society, its collection of plant and animal specimens and books on natural history. From that time on he was hooked on a biological career; a career he pursued with such distinction, with little formal training. For in his first year in the college he stumbled on 'logarithms and such like

evils' and ran away to Myanmar to work with a cousin in mining wolfram. Deciding, however, that he was not cut out for business, he returned to Mumbai, read for a B A in Zoology at St. Xavier's and later spent a year of practical training in taxonomy at the Berlin University Zoological Museum. For most of his life, he held no jobs, but pursued ornithology at the Bombay Natural History Society<sup>1</sup>.

As the philosopher Wittgenstein remarks 'practices reveal meanings'. This injunction is particularly germane for organismic biology, for the study of complex phenomena that students of this discipline confront admits of no universal generalizations. Ecology, ethology, biogeography, systematics, can therefore only advance on the basis of practical, precise knowledge about particular plants, animals, microbes or habitats<sup>2</sup>. Sálim Ali spent a life time collecting such practical, precise knowledge on many aspects of Indian bird life. He unravelled the fascinating breeding system of Weaver Birds and the role of sunbirds and flowerpeckers in pollinating and dispersing seeds of mistletoes. He undertook a series of regional bird surveys of Hyderabad, Travancore-Cochin, Afghanistan, Kailas Manasarovar, Kutch, Mysore, Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh. He investigated the famed Flamingo city of the Rann of Kutch, and ringed wintering water-fowl at Bharatpur to trace their migratory routes.



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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.

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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