

Sálim Ali

Sálim Ali's achievements as an ornithologist are well known, and there is little point in listing here the books he wrote, or the honours and prizes he received. In the pursuit of birds, he surveyed every corner of India, and in the process came to know the "ground truth" as few people can claim to do. He loved India's countryside and though he had travelled widely in Europe, America, South East Asia and the Middle East, he said that for dramatic scenery there was nothing to beat the glorious sunrises and sunsets as seen from the hill ranges of the Western Ghats. But it was the sight of a bird which excited him to the core, and he told me once that he himself found it somewhat inexplicable.

How strange that he started life as a "weakling" and often missed school because of ill-health. When he grew up he took charge of the situation, and with regular bedroom exercises (including dumb-bells), and a fast one hour walk every evening he built himself up to withstand the most vigorous strains of his field trips. He made it his normal practice not to drink any water during the day, even at home, so that when on his surveys (in Kutch, for example, with temperature of 110°F in the shade) he was not unduly harassed by thirst.

He was certainly fortunate in his extended family. Orphaned at an early age, he "grew up under the loving care of a maternal uncle



Hornbill 1995, No.4, Bombay Natural History Society, Photo by S A Hussain



Amiruddin Tyabji and his childless wife Hamidc Begum who were more to us all than any parents could be There was no one in that very mixed menage who was at all interested in birds except perhaps as ingredients of an occasional festive *pulao*". In later life after the tragic death of his wife, when he was only 40 years old, his sister and brother-in-law looked after him till almost the very end of his life.

What first brought him recognition as an outstanding ornithologist in the early thirties was his essay on the breeding biology of weaver birds (*Ploceus philippinus*). He discovered the strange fact that the male bayas started to build a nesting colony and suddenly one day, when the nests were about half complete the females arrived to take possession of a husband and home. Sâlim Ali did this study from a *machan* put up in the Kihim village (Kihim is the seaside village on the mainland just 7 miles across the ocean from the Gateway of India in Mumbai but over a hundred miles by road) pond a few feet away from a Babul tree on which the nests were being built. It is common experience that once the facts are known it is easy to follow the sequence of events; but to discover what is happening for the first time requires exceptional acuity. Anyone who has watched the bustling activity of a live Baya colony, will recognise how difficult it is to discover any pattern from the seeming confusion. By unremitting observation Sâlim Ali discovered that many male bayas had a roving eye, and that after they had established a nuptial bond with one female, they wanted to conquer another as well. So some males had several establishments in the same complex.

Simultaneously, Sâlim Ali discovered that during the breeding season, the thousands of fledglings are fed on soft bodied insects, as the young are incapable of digesting hard grain. The adult birds are therefore valuable biological controllers of insect pests which would have done great damage to our paddy fields. The environs of paddy fields are the favourite nesting sites of weaver birds. Based on such studies Sâlim Ali was able to recommend with confidence that Economic Ornithology should be introduced as an important subject in our Agricultural Universities.

JBS Haldane, reputedly one of the most versatile scientists of the present century, praised Sâlim for his capacity to indulge in the most meaningful scientific research with his bare hands, without the use of sophisticated "foreign" equipment. One instance of this was his observation of the migration of the Grey Wagtail (*Motacila cinerea*), which winters in India and breeds as far away as Siberia. He managed to catch and ring a wagtail on his lawn by the simple means of placing a few horse tail hairs in front of a mirror. The bird attacked its image in the mirror (a normal territorial response) and its feet got entangled in the hair on the ground. In this state it was easily caught and ringed for identification. This bird which spent the winter months in the suburbs of Bombay, departed for its breeding grounds some time in April, but miraculously returned to the same patch of lawn in Sâlim Ali's residence, every year, for several years, in mid September. No wonder Sâlim Ali was so fascinated with birds.

Zafar Futehally

