

The Fall of a Sparrow

The Life of Sálim Ali

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Sálim Ali

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It is difficult to write about Sálim Ali without eulogising. It is difficult to write about the book without slipping into a panegyric about the author. This is not a tribute to the ornithologist extraordinaire, it is a review of his autobiography. And yet, can one comment on a legend without sounding like a paean? Never mind, there can never be too many accolades for Sálim Ali, and let me pay my homage to him.

My first sentiment on reading *The Fall of a Sparrow* was "why haven't I read this book before?". There must be several ecologists and natural historians and others who have come into intense or peripheral contact with the breadth and scope of Sálim Ali's work (ie. used the *Book of Indian Birds* or the *Compact Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*), who have not yet read his autobiography. My advice to them: "READ IT NOW".

My sentiment does not stem from the fact that *The Fall of a Sparrow* is a work of literary greatness. It is not; though it is

extremely readable. But so much for literary merit. The reason I recommend it is that it gives an extreme close-up of the working of one of the most methodical and committed minds that turned its attention to natural history (or should one say whole organism biology) in the twentieth century.

There are several aspects of Sálim Ali, the ornithologist, which are not immediately apparent to his numerous fans and followers. These he reveals gradually, and it slowly becomes evident that this was a man with a vision and a goal. One sees the evolution of a birdwatcher into an ornithologist and ecologist. One sees from the vigour with which Salim Ali carried out his work that his marriage to ornithology was no casual enchantment, but true absolute love. His obsession with detail and his meticulousness suggest a degree of scientific rigour that compares with the very best.

He begins the rendering of his epic career with the Hyderabad Ornithological Survey. "I offered the BNHS to carry out systematic field surveys of birdlife in these areas on a voluntary basis, provided they would raise the necessary funds to cover expenses...". There are detailed accounts of Interlude in the Nilgiris, Afghanistan, his Ornithological Pilgrimage to Kailas Mansarowar, Flamingo city, Bharatpur, Bastar, and the Eastern Himalayas, and numerous other regional surveys that formed the substance of his work. Many of these surveys resulted in books such as *Birds of Sikkim* and *Birds*

of Kerala. However, his magnum opus was undoubtedly the 10 volumes of the *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*, written over 10 years between 1964 and 1974, the culmination of a life's work. This was later compiled into the *Compact Handbook*, the Bible of the Indian birdwatcher.

Sálim Ali lets on less about Sálim Ali the man. To a large extent, he lets his accounts of his friends and family tell the tale. One wonders, occasionally, if he has done justice to his subject. I believe he comes from a large and very interesting family. And while he is eloquent on the subject of some of his relatives, particularly Hamid Ali, his brother and some of his uncles, he is perhaps strangely silent about several others. He does, however, pay fond tribute to his mentors, his many colleagues and friends.

He devotes an entire chapter to his friend and benefactor, Loke Wan Tho, "a kindred spirit and dedicated co worker". "The near identity of our outlook and interests brought us closer together than any of my latter day friends".

His account of Meinertzhagen is interesting, simply because they were very much on opposite sides of the fence, the *former* a 'seditionist', the *latter* a die hard colonial. Meinertzhagen's entry in his diary on his first meeting with Sálim Ali reads "...He seemed intelligent, but is hideously ugly, not unlike Gandhi".

Sálim Ali writes with feeling about his 'guru', Professor Erwin Stresemann of Berlin University: "his simplicity and modesty, his unassuming erudition, his lively almost boyish humour, and the vastness of his scientific knowledge have left in me a vivid impression and admiration for the man, the scientist, the mentor and friend...".

And of course, there is much about the long and fruitful association with Dillon Ripley; and on Whistler, whose prescriptions and suggestions he credits for the success of the regional bird surveys. He pays generous tribute to the people he felt inspired his long and successful journey into the world of ornithology starting with J P Mullan and Rev Father Blatter of the Biology Department in St. Xaviers College, Bombay. The nostalgia is most apparent when he writes about S H Prater, one of his earliest colleagues from the Bombay Natural History Society, - "...when I visited him in London,...I found him a partly paralysed cripple in bed, all alone with a radio by his side to allay boredom".

And did you know that Sálim Ali was a motorcycle maniac? And would you have believed it if someone had appraised you of the fact casually? I would not. Well, he devotes a chapter to tell us of his lifelong affair with large, powerful two-wheelers, his many mistresses — "Harley Davidsons (three models of different horsepowers), a Douglas Scott, a new Hudson,...and the last and most beloved of all, the Sunbeam..". And "it is my everlasting regret that I never managed to



Salim Ali's abiding philosophy? - 'a bird in hand is worth two in the bush.' Well, not entirely, as his contribution to bird ecology has been as great as his contribution to taxonomy. The 'hand' here, one might add, belongs to one of the present generation of ornithologists, who was no doubt inspired by the man. The 'bird' is a paradise flycatcher, which had been caught in a mist net, about which Salim Ali said "no field collecting can be regarded as thorough where mist nets have not been employed to supplement shooting and visual observation".

possess a BMW to die happy!" The Sunbeam accompanied him to Europe when he went to attend the International Ornithological Congress in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1950, and they went on a "grand tour of England and the Continent, visiting widely scattered friends retired from India, as well as nature reserves,".

Finally, a word on Sálím Ali the scientist. That he was brought up on a diet of shikar which played a significant role in his life's work is apparent. He realises that conservationists and 'animal rights activists' and other general sentimentalists may find his attitude to shikar and hunting odd. He takes time to make his stand clear: "it is true that I despise purposeless killing, and regard it as an act of vandalism, deserving the severest condemnation. But my love for 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, (and) 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 nor indeed of their geographic distribution, ecology, and bionomics".

In the end, when Sálím Ali speaks of the enormous volume of books that he wrote and the numerous prizes he received, there is a tremendous sense of pride, and perhaps even a trace of surprise that he, from such humble beginnings, had accomplished so much. However, what comes through most strongly is the self-belief and commitment that he obviously displayed throughout his career, which is a model not just for ecologists, but for anyone.

As I had suspected, this has meandered into yet another encomium to Sálím Ali. Let me give in to it completely and finish with the refrain from Ripley's *Ode to Sálím on his Seventy seventh birthday*

*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.*

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