



Sahin Ali



## SÁLIM A ALI

(1896-1987)

Elected Fellow 1958

SÁLIM ABDUL ALI or SÁLIM A ALI, as he preferred to be known, was born on 11th November 1896, in the rambling family house at Khetwadi, presently a densely over-crowded area in the heart of the city, but then a middle class residential locality of Bombay city. The youngest of an orphaned family of five brothers and four sisters, he had lost both his parents by the age three and was brought up by his maternal uncle and aunt who were, to him, all that his parents would have been.

Like his brothers before him, he had his schooling at the St. Xaviers' High School at Bombay. He was an indifferent student, rather more interested in games and outdoor activities than studies. The only subject he mastered was the English language and his writings in later years were to be included in an anthology of English prose by Indian writers. From his early days, Zoology, particularly Ornithology, had been his primary interest and his ambition was to be a professional Zoologist. Unfortunately, owing to his inability to master mathematics which was part of the steps in formal education, he had to abandon his efforts to obtain a formal degree. However, in course of time, he did complete the BSc curriculum in Zoology with the goading and encouragement of Fr. E Blatter, the Professor of Botany and Prof JP Mullan, the professor of Zoology at St Xaviers College, Bombay.

Through all this period of uncertainty, the study of Ornithology remained his first love and abiding interest. The close links that he had established with the Bombay Natural History Society firmed his resolve to specialise in Ornithology. As there was no university or institution in the country where training in scientific Ornithology was available, he took training at the Berlin University Zoological Museum under Prof Erwin Stresemann, including a training in practical taxonomy on a collection of Indian birds. Berlin proved to be the turning point in his ornithological career. Stresemann's cooperation and guidance, his scientific knowledge and unassuming erudition made a lasting impression on Salim Ali and Stresemann remained his *guru* throughout his life.

On his return to India he started scientific association with the Bombay Natural History Society, which was to benefit the science of Ornithology enormously. This com-



menced with the bird surveys he organised in almost all parts of the Indian sub-continent from the early nineteen thirties to the late nineteen seventies.

All the bird surveys had a target. In the Berars Survey, for instance, the target species was the White-fronted Tree Pie, a species which is now restricted to the rain forests of Kerala, but had been once recorded by a reliable ornithologist from Berars. The surveys along the Western Ghats, the hills of Central India, Bastar and Orissa looked at the discontinuous distribution of rain forest, birds now restricted to the Western Ghats of the South and the forests of eastern India. Salim Ali was collecting evidence for 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 India divided by over 2000 kms 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 Salim Ali's young field biologists. Another notable rediscovery was of Finn's Baya after a period of over 50 years in the Kumaon Terai.

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 familiarise 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 as some of the best examples of data collecting available to the student of bird study or field ornithology.

It was as a teacher that Salim Ali really excelled. The University of Bombay had recognised the Society as a Research Institute in Ornithology with Salim 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.

The rapport that he established with the scientists who joined the Society during the period of field activity was so good that 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, his students and staff had no regular work hours, but neither had he. If they 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 Salim Ali was in 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 the Princes of India. It was in their States that he did his major bird study surveys. The only assistance he had was from the Bombay Natural History Society which gave him the services of a skinner for the bird collection that he gave them. Except for the time he was the Nature Education Organiser in 1927 of the BNHS, he never 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 sub-continent.

Salim Ali was as active in the field of conservation as he was in Ornithology. He was probably the only person who had travelled to all the obscure regions of the Indian sub-continent at one time or another of his life and knew the country and its forests 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.

Recognition came late to Salim Ali but came abundantly. The Asiatic Society's Gold Medal for research in Asiatic Zoology, Padma Bhushan and later the Padma Vibhushan for continued distinction in Zoology from the Government of India. The Sunderlal Hora Memorial Prize of the Indian National Science Academy for "Outstanding Contributions to Indian Ornithology". The degree of DSc from the Universities of Aligarh, Delhi and Andhra. The Union Gold Medal of the British Ornithologists Union, the Pavlovsky Centenary Memorial Medal of the USSR Academy of Medical Science, the Order of the Golden Ark of the Netherlands, the C V Raman Medal of the Indian National Science Academy, the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh Gold Medal, National Research Professorship in Ornithology by the Government of India, National Award for Wildlife Conservation from the Government of India and Paul Getty International Prize for Wildlife Conservation. Among all these recognitions, he had the greatest sentimental value for the Asiatic Society's Gold Medal because it was the first recognition for Ornithology to an Indian. Also, as he believed, that it was based on the first critical appraisal of the merit of his work. He was honoured with Padma Bhushan in 1958 and Padma Vibhushan in 1976.



The Bombay Natural History Society was very much a part of Salim 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 sixty-nine years and the organisation 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.

Salim 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.

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