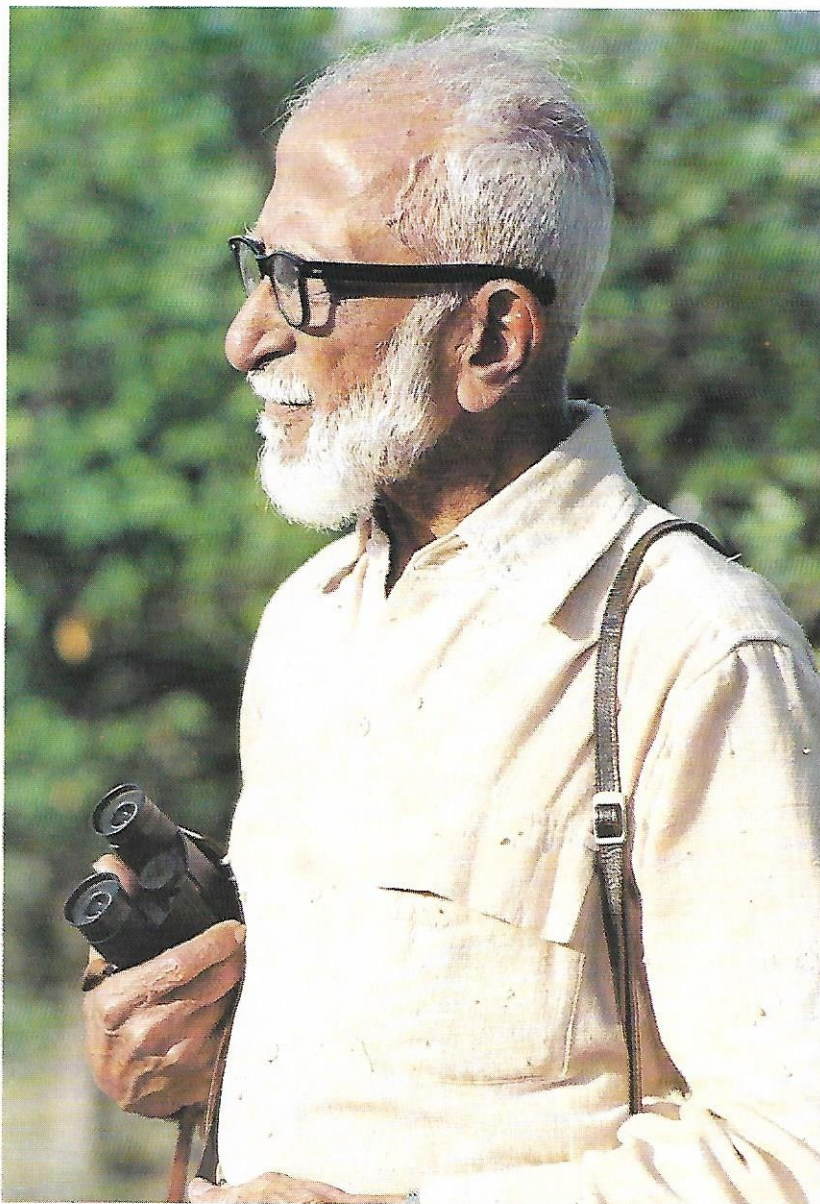


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BELINDA WRIGHT



# Salim Ali Remembered

**He was a diminutive visionary whose  
lasting contribution to avian knowledge  
has stirred international interest. An  
affectionate portrait by  
DILNAVAZ VARIAVA.**

IN A RAMBLING house in Khetwadi, Bombay, a boy of ten could be found spending rapturous hours away from his schoolbooks, watching the birds in the makeshift aviary which he had built. The birds were partridge and quail, rescued from the cooking pot with the help of an obliging cook — and the boy was Salim Ali. Little did he or the cook realise that he would spend the better part of the next 80 years observing birds in every

corner of the Indian sub-continent, and in opening a rich world of avian knowledge and wonder for himself and for so many of his countrymen.

When he passed away peacefully, on June 20, 1987 Salim Ali had done more than any other Indian in the past century to create an awareness of India's wildlife and of the need to preserve it. Not only had he authored numerous books on the bird life of India, but he had



helped in preventing the destruction of one of the world's finest bird sanctuaries, the Keoladeo Ghana Bird Sanctuary at Bharatpur (which provides the only wintering ground in India for the rare Siberian Crane). He also spearheaded the protection of many other natural areas as parks and sanctuaries. His work brought him national and international honours in the last few decades of his life. Apart from doctorates from several universities, Salim Ali won many national and international medals and awards including the J Paul Getty International Prize for Wildlife Conservation — a \$50,000 award which is considered the Nobel Prize among conservation awards.

It all started at the age of around 10, when, like many other little boys of that period, he shot a sparrow with his air gun — and noticed a yellow mark on its throat. His uncle left the young Salim outside the gate of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) — with a note to its Honorary Secretary, but trembling “at the prospect of meeting a full grown Sahib face to face.” The kindly Honorary Secretary, of the BNHS, however, promptly identified the bird as a Yellow throated sparrow and quickly banished the youngster's nervousness as he led him through the Society's remarkable collection of specimens, showing him bird after bird found in the Indian Empire.

Thenceforth, Salim's interest in birds took shape — guided by the kindly Secretary and staff of the Bombay

Natural History Society. Under their guidance he learnt how to collect and preserve specimens — an activity which was indispensable in those early years when the avifauna of India had yet to be fully identified and documented. The Society's library provided fodder for his growing appetite for books on natural history and particularly on bird life. He sorely felt the lack of a properly illustrated book on birds — a gap which he himself filled in 1941, when the BNHS published his *Book of Indian Birds*, which has been a veritable bible for thousands of bird watchers. Numerous other bird books followed, ending with the monumental 10 volumes of the *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan* which he co-authored with S. Dillon Ripley and which is the current definitive work for all serious researchers in the field of ornithology. This prodigious work seems all the more incredible considering the many strange twists of fate that seemed at each stage to take Salim away from his cherished work but, ultimately, brought him closer to it.

After passing his school leaving examination “perilously near the bottom of the list”, Salim began his studies in zoology — but found himself in an unequal struggle with the mathematics that was then a compulsory adjunct to the study of biology. An invitation from his brother in Burma to join him in business provided a strategic escape from logarithms — and for 3 years Salim engaged himself in an activity for which he had not the

slightest inclination or skill. Fortunately the business folded up in 1917, and Salim returned to Bombay to pick up a formal education in commerce. Happily he was goaded and encouraged by the Director of the Biology Department of St. Xavier's College simultaneously to complete his bachelor's degree in Zoology.

Salim's daily routine thereafter was to study commerce from 8 a.m. to 10 am, then rush off to St. Xavier's for his Zoology classes and thence to the BNHS to browse in the library or rummage among the bird collections. This capacity to work hard and to organise his time effectively was a characteristic which remained with him throughout, and contributed significantly to his monumental achievements. In later life, he was up at dawn to work on his books, scrupulously punctual at all times, and busy throughout the day in a calm, systematic and thoroughly absorbed fashion. He aimed for perfection in all that he did, and his many students at the Bombay Natural History Society benefited by suffering the sharpness of his tongue if they dared slip from the tough standards he demanded. Any manuscript sent to him for his comments received his careful attention and he was never too busy, or too famous, to reply to a child's letter — remembering, perhaps, the way his own life had been shaped by the kindly encouragement he received from its Honorary Secretary when he first entered the portals of the Society.

When Salim finished his studies at Davar's he went

back to Burma in 1919 for another attempt at business — which was equally unsuccessful. He returned in 1924 to finally take up a job in the field nearest to his heart. He worked for two years as a Guide Lecturer in the Natural History Section of the Prince of Wales Museum — and then left for Berlin to study ornithology under the eminent naturalist, Dr. Erwin Stresemann. Neither then, nor later in life, did he worry about what fate held in store for him or about how he would keep "the wolf from the door." In fact, he needed to think about this as soon as he came back from Germany, and found himself jobless — and hunting unsuccessfully for a job in the field of natural history when such jobs were even rarer than they are today.

Finding himself jobless was one of those fortunate misfortunes which shaped Salim's life by forcing him to live inexpensively at the family's country retreat in Kihim, where he could devote all his attention to ornithological work — with the active encouragement and support of his wife, Tehmina. She must have been a remarkable person herself to encourage Salim to do the work he loved, rather than to look for conventional security and comfort. It was during this "jobless" period that Salim Ali prepared the text of his *Book of Indian Birds* and also conceived the idea of doing regional ornithological surveys in the Princely State of India. He offered his services gratis to the BNHS, if they could fund the expenses for the surveys — and thus Salim Ali began





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Once upon a bird

systematically filling the gaps in ornithological knowledge as he travelled the length and breadth of the country. There was neither fame nor wealth nor fortune attached to such work in those days — but for Salim Ali, trying to cover as much ground as the shoestring budgets permitted, there were rich rewards in the sheer joy of being out in the field doing what he loved best. While some of his work continued along traditional lines, and was most useful in establishing the distribution pattern of birds in India, and for taxonomic work, his pioneering contribution was in shifting attention to the living bird — its behaviour and ecology.

One of Dr. Salim Ali's most valuable attributes was a delightful sense of humour which enabled him to see, and share the others, the comic aspect of every situation. His dry wit and his ability to laugh at himself made him a wonderful companion on field outings. His autobiography *The Fall of a Sparrow* is a thoroughly enjoyable combination of comments of his work mixed with humorous asides about the people and situations he encountered.

Salim Ali's mind was remarkable not merely for the amount of natural history information it contained, but for the keen spirit of inquiry that was always in evidence. He was always eager to learn — not merely about birds but about anything that stimulated his spirit of scientific inquiry. He was balanced and cautious in his assessments, and his recommendations thus carried the weight of his care and restraint. It was thanks to an intervention by Salim Ali, and two others, that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru halted the draining of the now world famous Keoladeo Ghana Bird Sanctuary near Bharatpur. Many other wild places and wild species also owe their survivals to his interventions. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who had been exposed to his *Book of Indian Birds* as a child, was always willing to listen carefully to his voice on matters of environmental significance. He spent the last decade of his life training the young scientists of the Bom-

bay Natural History Society through his example in producing balanced field research on a variety of subjects from bird migration to preventing bird strikes at India's aerodromes, and from the ecology of wetlands rich in bird life to the conservation of endangered species. Shortly before he died, Dr. Salim Ali had the pleasure of learning that the Jerdon's Courser, a bird last reported around 1900, had been re-discovered by one of his young scientists.

Dr. Salim Ali realised that few people now had the wherewithal to dedicate their lives to the study of natural history as he had done. He believed that the continuation of such research was essential for conserving what remains of India's natural wealth, and he therefore donated whatever he could of his prizes and his not very considerable wealth of the Salim Ali Nature Conservation Fund of the Bombay Natural History Society. This premier institution, of which he was the Honorary Secretary and later the President for many decades, is now trying to perpetuate his work by the creation of a Salim Ali Memorial Fund through the contribution of those who believed in the value of what he did.

Salim Ali passed away at the age of 92, having done more for the protection of nature than any other Indian. He had the rare gift of being able to live fully in the present, without any fear or anxiety about the future, and often commented on how fortunate and fulfilling his life had been. It was in fact he who converted the bleak outlines of orphanhood, of business failure, of joblessness and an unprofitable passion for nature into something so richly rewarding for himself and for all of us. It was Dr. Salim Ali's deep love of nature and his ability to bring this vision to thousands of people that has enabled us to inherit a few places which are still rich in wildlife. Their continued protection would be the best way to remember him — and the best gift we could give to ourselves and our children.

