

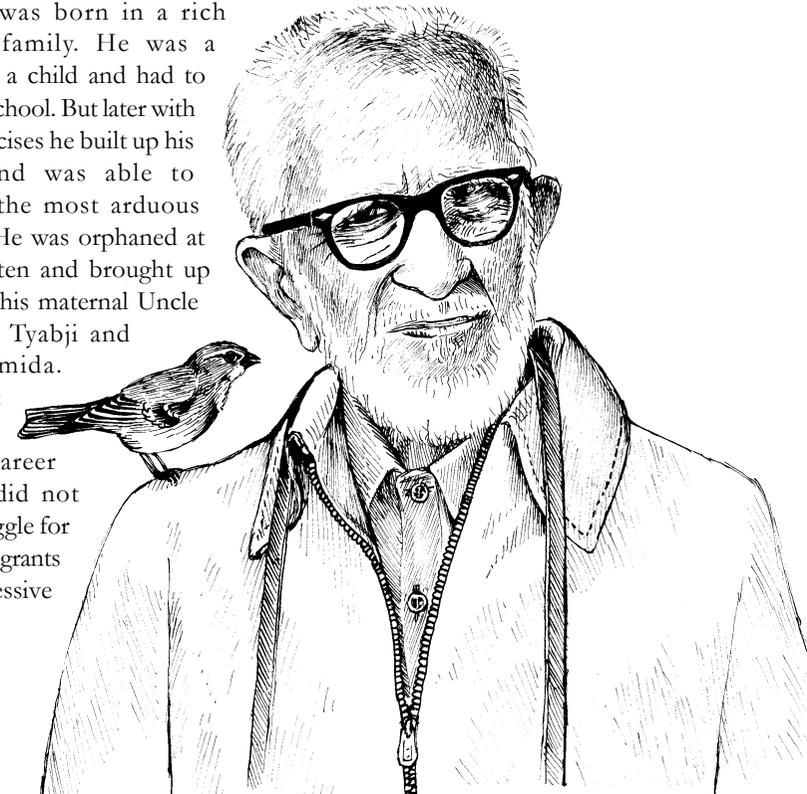


*“...Your message has gone high and low across the land and we are sure that weaver birds will weave your initials in their nests, and swifts will perform parabolas in the sky in your honour.”*

*– Paul Getty Conservation Prize Citation (1976)*

Salim Ali was indisputably the greatest field biologist of twentieth-century-India. Known as the *Birdman of India* he meticulously observed and documented the birds of the sub-continent for almost 80 years.

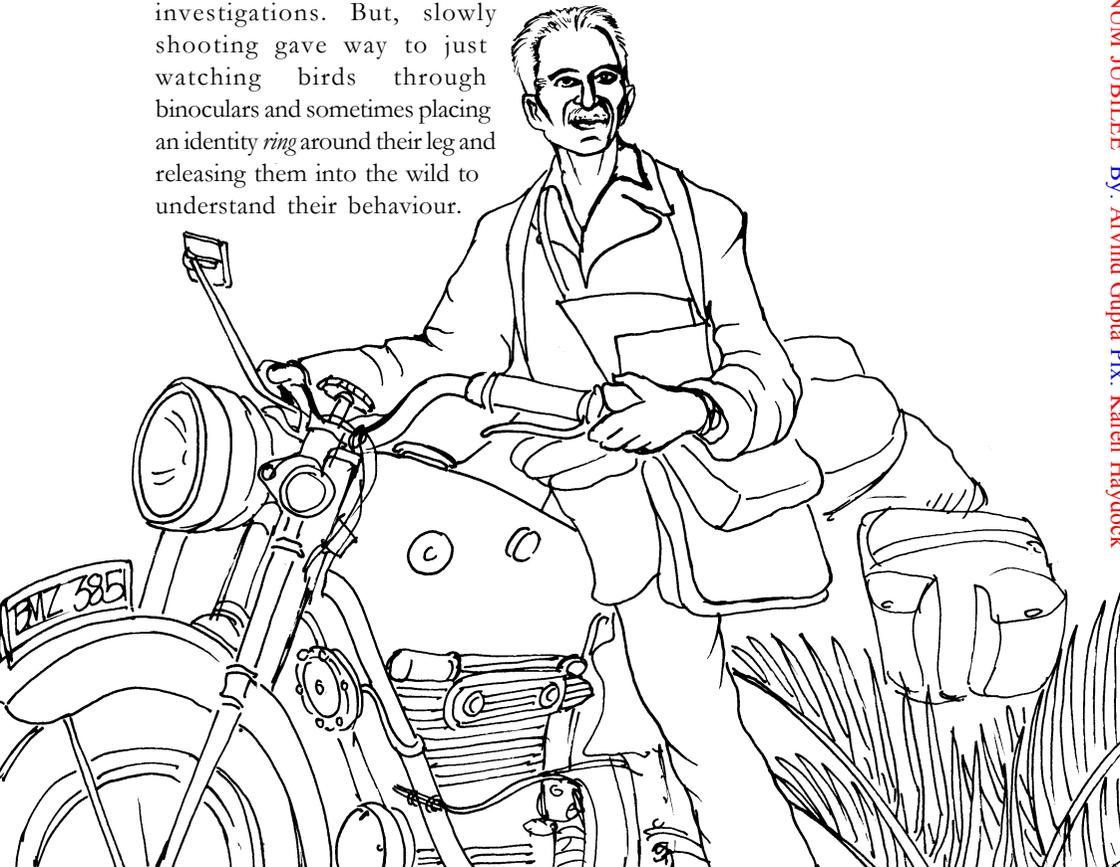
Salim Ali was born in a rich merchant family. He was a weakling as a child and had to often miss school. But later with regular exercises he built up his stamina and was able to withstand the most arduous field trips. He was orphaned at the age of ten and brought up lovingly by his maternal Uncle Amiruddin Tyabji and aunt Hamida. Throughout his long research career Salim Ali did not have to struggle for government grants as his progressive



family stood solidly besides him and supported his work. He studied zoology at the St. Xavier's College, Bombay but dropped midway to look after the family's tungsten trade in Burma. As business did not interest him, he returned to biology. In 1918, he married a distant relative Tehmina.

After failing to get a job with the Zoological Survey of India he worked for a while as a guide lecturer in the Prince of Wales Museum in Bombay. In 1928, he went to Germany and trained under Prof Erwin Stresemann at the Zoological Museum of Berlin. In 1930, finding no suitable employment he moved to Kihim a coastal village near Mumbai. Here he studied the breeding biology of bay birds which won him recognition as a world class ornithologist. He found that it is the male bay which builds the nest. Then suddenly one day the female arrives and takes possession of a husband and the half-finished home! He found that the thousands of baby bays were fed on soft bodied insects as the young are incapable of digesting hard grain. Adult bays were thus valuable biological controller of insect pests. Salim Ali recommended the teaching of Economic Ornithology in all Agricultural Universities.

Salim Ali at times shot birds - some for the pot but largely for scientific investigations. But, slowly shooting gave way to just watching birds through binoculars and sometimes placing an identity *ring* around their leg and releasing them into the wild to understand their behaviour.



INDIAN NATIONAL SCIENCE ACADEMY INSA PLATINUM JUBILEE By: Arvind Gupta Pix: Karen Haydock

His studies unravelled the role of flower peckers and sunbirds in pollination and dispersing the seeds of the mistletoe. He also studied the Flamingos of the Runn of Kutch in depth. He did regional bird surveys of Hyderabad, Travancore, Cochin, Afghanistan, Kailash Manasarovar (China), Kutch, Mysore, Goa, Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. He showed that several species of the waterfowl migrated all the way to Siberia. All throughout, he maintained the most meticulous records and distilled his knowledge into a series of superbly written and illustrated books; he began in 1941 with *The Book of Indian Birds*, and followed this by *The Birds of Kutch*, *Indian Hill Birds*, *Birds of Kerala*, *Birds of Sikkim*, and finally his magnum opus, the ten volume *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*. His last bird book, the *Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern Himalaya* was published in 1977. In 1985 he wrote his charming autobiographical account, *The Fall of a Sparrow*. His deep understanding of bird life and the fragile eco-system led him to conservation. It was at Salim Ali's advice that the *Silent Valley* – a unique ecosystem and the *Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary* were established. His total dedication to science and to nature conservation was unique. He ensured the survival of the 200-year old *Bombay Natural History Society* (BNHS) by personally writing to Pandit Nehru for financial help.



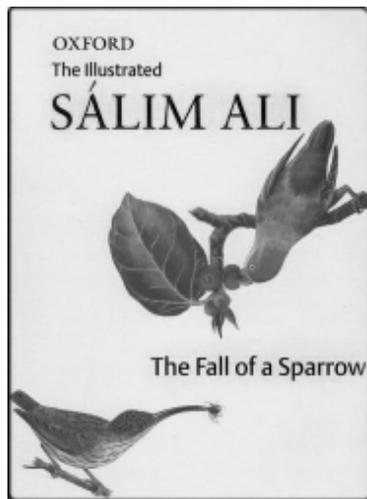
India is one of the top twelve mega diversity countries of the world. But still there exists no comprehensive documentation of its flora and fauna. Old records show the Mughal King's interest in natural history. For instance, Emperor Jehangir meticulously recorded the description of living beings along with the breeding behaviour of the Sarus Crane in his diary. He commissioned a talented artist Mansur to draw coloured pictures of birds. But this was followed by a long dark period of neglect. Indian philosophy considered external reality as *maya* – an illusion. So why study or document it? This led to the gradual decay of the biological sciences.

The British took up field work and documentation of India's flora and fauna for their colonial interests. Stalwarts like Sir Joseph Hooker, Hugh Whistler

and Winter-Blyth did pioneering work in documenting India's biodiversity. Salim Ali was perhaps the first Indian scientist whose work was grounded in careful, painstaking observations. This made his work unique in the annals of Indian science.

Salim Ali's wife died in 1939 following a minor surgery and for the next five decades his sister's family took total care of his needs. Salim Ali was able to do so much and devote his entire life to the study of birds simply because his family accepted what other Indian families would undoubtedly have dubbed as madness. J. B. S. Haldane praised Salim Ali for his capacity to do the most meaningful scientific research with literally his bare hands holding a pair of binoculars.

Once he caught a grey wagtail by placing a few strands of horsetail hair in front of a mirror in his lawn. The bird attacked its image (a normal territorial response) and soon got entangled in the hair. Salim Ali then caught the bird and let it go after placing an identity *ring* around its leg. This bird which breeds in Siberia spends a few months in Bombay. For several years the same bird appeared in Salim Ali's lawn in April and departed again in September for Siberia. No wonder, Salim Ali was hooked on to birds!



Salim Ali became a legend in his own lifetime, not only in India, but amongst students of birds and lovers of nature the world over. He received numerous awards – the Union Medal of the British Ornithologist's Union (1967), Phillips Medal from the World Conservation Union (1969), Padma Vibhushan (1976) and the Paul Getty Wildlife Conservation Prize of the WWF (1976). He received three honorary doctorates and was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1985. Dr. Salim Ali died in 1987, after a long battle with prostate cancer. In 1990, the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History was established in Coimbatore.

