Unforgettable Sálim Ali

By both his work and his life, this great scientist inspired three generations of Indian naturalists

BY J.C. DANIEL
AS TOLD TO MOHAN SIVANAND

I WATCHED the heaving monsoon seas with a sinking heart. Being tossed about in a narrow dug-out canoe was not something I'd bargained for when I'd joined the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) a few months earlier. As one of my legs began to twitch uncontrollably, the tiny bearded man sitting next to me asked, "Can you swim, Daniel?"

"Swim? Y-yes," I stammered, wondering wildly if Sálim Ali, the legendary honorary secretary of the BNHS, was about to give the order to abandon ship. Instead, Sálim Ali looked at me for a moment and said quietly, "I can't." His calm words immediately

SHAR CENTRE

FRONT COVER PORTRAIT BY J.P. IRANI, COURTESY: BNHS

banished much of my fear, and from then on, I learnt not only to cope with harsh surroundings but to savour every minute as a true naturalist should.

That was the kind of effect Sálim Moizuddin Abdul Ali had on you. To the world he was amazingly versatile—ornithologist, explorer, ecologist, teacher, writer. But to all of us at the BNHS, with which he was associated for 80 of his 91 years, this bright-eyed, sparrow-like figure was an all-knowing father, the person we referred to as the Old Man. And like a father, he dazzled us with his achievements.

Taking up ornithology at a time when the subject in India was little more than an Englishman's pastime, Sálim Ali made it a serious pursuit. He studied the birds of nearly every region of the subcontinent, and wrote with such wit and elegance that he was included in an anthology entitled *Indian Masters of English*, along with Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu. His many awards included the Padma Vibhushan and three honorary doctorates. He was nominated to Parliament and made a National Professor. Under him the BNHS became a premier research centre, and its *Journal* a staple for biologists the world over.

Born in 1896 into a prosperous, close-knit Bombay family, Sálim Ali, the youngest of ten children, was orphaned early. His childhood hero was his flamboyant uncle, Amiruddin Tyabji, a sportsman who joined royalty on grand *shikars*. When Sálim was ten, Uncle Amiruddin presented him with a Daisy airgun. One day young Sálim shot a strange-looking sparrow. When his uncle couldn't explain why it had a yellow streak below its neck, he suggested that Sálim take the bird to the BNHS. There the secretary, an Englishman, identified it as a yellow-throated sparrow, and showed the boy the society's vast stuffed-bird collection. Awestruck, Sálim Ali remained hooked on birds and the BNHS for life.

In between visits to the society, Sálim Ali scraped through high school. College, though, proved too difficult, and "escaping from logarithms and higher algebra," he sailed to Burma and spent the next ten years there as a partner in his brothers' timber and wolfram business. But when Sálim Ali was sent into remote jungles to select timber, he'd spent most of his time observing birds and wildlife. Not surprisingly, the business collapsed and, owing a lot of money, he had to return to Bombay with Tehmina, his wife of six years.

He got a job as a guide-lecturer at Bombay's Prince of Wales Museum in 1927, but after two years decided to study ornithology

J.C. Daniel, 61, is curator of the Bombay Natural History Society.

at the Berlin University Zoological Museum under Professor Erwin Stresemann. When Sálim Ali returned to Bombay a year later, he discovered that his guide-lecturer's post had been abolished. There was no chance of working for the government either—a couple of years earlier he'd been rejected for an ornithologist's job because he didn't have a college degree.

In those days, anybody with his energy and command of English could easily have found a comfortable niche in a Bombay firm, but Sálim Ali didn't even bother to apply. His family thought him mad—an unemployed married man, cheerfully content to watch birds all the time!

Tehmina, though, stood by him. A warm, lively woman, she came from an affluent family and was educated at a finishing school in England. But she was a country girl at heart and shared many of her husband's interests. "Finishing school," Sálim Ali once wryly remarked, "did not finish her completely." Tehmina's family owned a small cottage in Kihim, a coastal village south of Bombay, and the young couple moved there. Kihim was green and full of birds to keep Sálim Ali forever busy. "Don't take a job," Tehmina told him, "if you can't enjoy it." Sálim Ali never did.

In 1930 Sálim Ali went to the BNHS with a proposal. Indian birds had not been studied systematically, so would the society send him on ornithological surveys? He didn't want a salary, only expenses. Thus for the next 20 years Sálim Ali roamed the subcontinent, studying birds from Kutch to Sikkim, from Afghanistan to Kerala. His methods were so unique—he wove history, ecology and geography into his description of a bird and its habitat—that in 1936 he got a letter from Ernst Mayr, a leading American biologist, who was bird curator at New York's Museum of Natural History. "Congratulations," wrote Mayr, who'd been following Sálim

BNHS

A young Sálim and Tehmina Ali

SHÁHID ALI

With Dillon Ripley, his co-author

Ali's reports in the BNHS *Journal.* "I hope your work will set a standard for similar surveys."

For Sálim Ali these two decades were a time of both achievement and sorrow. In 1939 Tehmina, who accompanied him on all his expeditions, died suddenly after minor surgery. For months he was rudderless and stayed with his sister in Bombay. True consolation came only when he resumed work.

In 1941 Sálim Ali published *The Book of Indian Birds.* It was an instant success, and its royalties enabled Sálim Ali to repay his old business debts. Jawaharlal Nehru read it and liked it so much that he sent it as a birthday present to his daughter. "It opened my eyes to a new world," Indira said years later. "For the first time, I paid attention to bird songs, and was able to identify the birds."

During this period, Sálim Ali also made innumerable friends, like S. Dillon Ripley, a young zoologist with the US Army in Ceylon, who later became secretary of Washington's Smithsonian Institution. Pooling their wide knowledge, the two men would later publish the ten-volume *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan.*

By the time I became BNHS curator in 1960, the man who once had been rejected for a government job for want of a degree was guiding PhD scholars. I watched him work amid stuffed birds and neatly arranged piles of books and paper. He was so precise that when I had an appointment with him, I made sure I arrived early. When any visitor's business was over, Sálim Ali would raise his grey eyebrows and pat the arms of his chair. If that failed, he'd politely say good-bye and resume his tasks.

Bad work maddened him—his face would redden, and his head would shake. One look at a shoddy report and he'd fling it aside, storming furiously. "Silly" was his strongest term of abuse, but he had such a way of delivering it, you'd never want to hear the word again. Once Venugopal, a BNHS clerk,

SHÁHID ALI

With Dillon Ripley, his co-author

Ali's reports in the BNHS *Journal.* "I hope your work will set a standard for similar surveys."

For Sálim Ali these two decades were a time of both achievement and sorrow. In 1939 Tehmina, who accompanied him on all his expeditions, died suddenly after minor surgery. For months he was rudderless and stayed with his sister in Bombay. True consolation came only when he resumed work.

In 1941 Sálim Ali published *The Book of Indian Birds.* It was an instant success, and its royalties enabled Sálim Ali to repay his old business debts. Jawaharlal Nehru read it and liked it so much that he sent it as a birthday present to his daughter. "It opened my eyes to a new world," Indira said years later. "For the first time, I paid attention to bird songs, and was able to identify the birds."

During this period, Sálim Ali also made innumerable friends, like S. Dillon Ripley, a young zoologist with the US Army in Ceylon, who later became secretary of Washington's Smithsonian Institution. Pooling their wide knowledge, the two men would later publish the ten-volume *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan.*

By the time I became BNHS curator in 1960, the man who once had been rejected for a government job for want of a degree was guiding PhD scholars. I watched him work amid stuffed birds and neatly arranged piles of books and paper. He was so precise that when I had an appointment with him, I made sure I arrived early. When any visitor's business was over, Sálim Ali would raise his grey eyebrows and pat the arms of his chair. If that failed, he'd politely say good-bye and resume his tasks.

Bad work maddened him—his face would redden, and his head would shake. One look at a shoddy report and he'd fling it aside, storming furiously. "Silly" was his strongest term of abuse, but he had such a way of delivering it, you'd never want to hear the word again. Once Venugopal, a BNHS clerk,

forgot to post a letter Sálim Ali had given him two days earlier. "Silly fellow," Sálim Ali yelled when he found out, and, grabbing a bottle of ink, emptied it over Venugopal's head.

Dry Wit. But his anger always disappeared quickly. Venugopal, for instance, was an avid stamp collector, and Sálim Ali, who got letters from all over the world, used to give him the stamps. After the ink shower, Venugopal, went home. But when he returned, Sálim Ali apologized and gave him another set of stamps.

Nothing escaped Sálim Ali's notice, and he took a personal interest in each of us. BNHS naturalists on field trips had to write to Sálim Ali every week. "He'd reply promptly," recalls V.C. Ambedkar, Sálim Ali's first student. "And he wouldn't just comment on my bird observations. He'd emphasize the importance of punctuality, hard work and correct English."

In 1962, when Ambedkar was on assignment in the tiger-infested forests of Kumaon *terai,* Sálim Ali visited his student's anxious mother. "I've informed her that you have not yet been eaten by a tiger," he wrote to Ambedkar, adding with his characteristic dry wit, "She appeared pleased."

Writing letters, in fact, was another of his great enthusiasms. He spent large sums on postage out of his own pocket, keeping in constant touch with friends or voicing his deep concern for the environment. The setting up of the Bharatpur and Karnala bird sanctuaries, the decision not to destroy Kerala's Silent Valley for the sake of a power project and many other similar measures were due in large part to the Old Man's powerful letters to prime ministers and forest officials. But his mail wasn't always addressed to the high and mighty. He even wrote to poor villagers he'd met during his expeditions, though he knew they were illiterate and couldn't reply.

When in Bombay, Sálim Ali had a strict routine. Up by five, he'd take a walk, then work for a couple of hours before leaving for the BNHS. Every morning, at precisely 9.45, I'd hear his motorbike outside the office. Although he worked long hours, he was in bed by 10pm. "Like the birds," he'd say, "I prefer to work by day." He ate like a bird, too, enjoying good food, but consuming very little—a bit of curry and, often, just one *chapatti.*

These austere food habits sometimes troubled me while on field trips with the Old Man. I'd be too embarrassed to eat more than three *chapattis,* so I survived by getting friendly with the cook and eating one dinner in the kitchen and another with Sálim Ali.

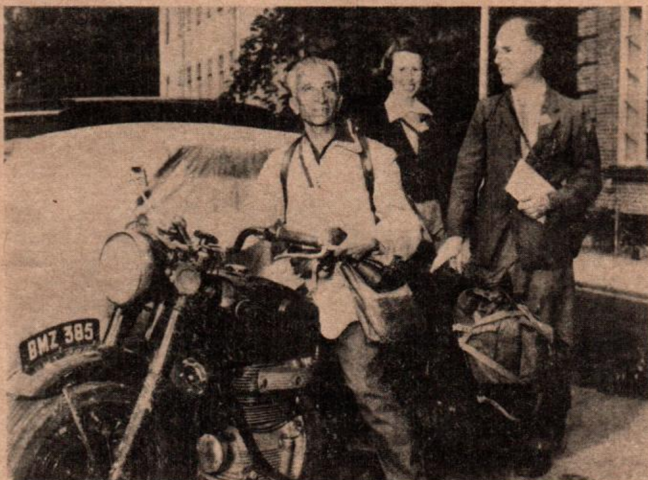
Others, too, had problems. Knowing his pet aversions, nobody dared smoke or drink in his presence. Travelling with him, you

often saw a small group desperately puffing away during breaks. And above all, Sálim Ali hated snorers. To share a camp room with him, you had to be a proven non-snorer. Once the Madras government provided him with a camp guard who snored. Sálim Ali sent him packing.

Because Sálim Ali's needs were few, he had hardly any use for money. His writings and awards brought him large amounts, but he kept very little for himself, liberally handing out scholarships and grants to needy students. He donated his 1976 Paul Getty Wildlife Conservation Prize, worth $50,000, to a conservation-research fund at the BNHS.

Even in the days when he worked on shoestring grants, there'd be money left after a project. "Don't spend without purpose," he often told me. "You're accountable not just to the BNHS, but to yourself." He avoided buying new things, preferring to maintain his knife, gun, binoculars, car or motorbike in mint condition.

He had a teenager's fascination for motorbikes, which he loved to tinker with and drive at breakneck speed. In 1950 he shipped his massive Sunbeam 500cc bike to Sweden and, luggage strapped behind, roared into an ornithological conference, startling the other delegates, who assumed he'd ridden all the way from India. After the conference, he rode through Europe meeting friends, human and avian. In France he was injured in a collision with a speeding truck, but the next morning Sálim Ali got out of his hospital bed and repaired



Sálim Ali on his favourite Sunbeam motorbike at Uppsala, Sweden, in 1950. With him are two other conference delegates

BNHS

the bike himself. Head bandaged, he kept a lunch appointment later that day.

Nothing could dampen Sálim Ali's spirit, not even old age. Until his 87th year, he conducted major expeditions, and in 1983 spent four weeks in the remote and difficult Namdapha national park, near the Burmese border. Two years later he was set to go to the Himalayas in search of the mountain quail, last seen in 1858. But he suddenly fell ill and we all persuaded him to stay. He used the time to finish one more book, *The Fall of a Sparrow,* his delightful autobiography.

One of Sálim Ali's last wishes was to set up an ornithological institute in Bombay. In April 1987—after his illness had been diagnosed as cancer—he flew to Delhi to attend a seminar to convince Rajiv Gandhi about the need for the institute. Hospitalized as soon as he arrived, he kept insisting on going to the seminar until the Prime Minister visited him and assured full support.

Two months later Sálim Ali died, probably the only thing he ever did without his heart in it. For, despite all he'd done, he felt there was much more left. "I'm not ready to die," he used to tell me. "I've only touched the surface."

Idle Decision

NOT ONE politician is recognized by a nation-wide holiday in Britain. Apart from saints of the Christian tradition, only three persons are commemorated by publicly recognized name days. Two are poets—Shakespeare and Burns—and the third is the rascal Guy Fawkes who, on November 5, 1605, was apprehended in the treasonable act of trying to blow up the Houses of Parliament.

— J.J. Knights in *The Globe and Mail,* Toronto

Economic Miracle

WHILE visiting Palestine, a tourist and his guide arrived at the shore of the Sea of Galilee. "It costs twenty dollars to cross it in a canoe," said the guide.

"That's very expensive," the tourist replied.

"Don't forget that this is a very famous lake."

"I know, but it's far too expensive."

"Jesus walked on these waters."

"It's no wonder with those prices!"

— *500 cuentos para adultos*