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Remembering
Sálim Ali

by Zafar Futehally

Shahid Ali

My first recollection of Sálim Ali was during my school days in 1937. Sálim was a great friend of my father's and their friendship was based on the fact that both of them had a tremendous sense of humour. I never heard any serious conversation between the two of them – it was all banter and laughter. I soon found that Sálim had come to stay with us because he had to have a mastoid operation. This was a serious affair and could have been fatal, but there were no signs of fear in Sálim's attitude. His wife was away in Japan at the time, but the operation was urgent; and fortunately it proved successful. However, as a result of the operation one ear went out of commission, and it is amazing that in spite of this handicap Sálim was so good at identifying bird calls. He once told me, for example, that the ioras of Pali Hill had a special tune of their own, different from the ioras of other localities. In spite of being so acutely discriminating about bird calls, he did not, strangely, have a good ear for music.

Later, in 1939, I visited his home in Dehra Dun. It was a lovely little house made beautiful and charming by his wife Tehmina, who was well known for her good taste and her ability to make a rupee go very far. Since Sálim was not a man of means at the time, this was a great asset. The landlord, Ugra Sen, a great admirer of Sálim, contributed to his tenant's survival by charging a negligible rent. Sálim, in spite of his shortage of cash, was never short of company because of his charm and humour. I recall him telling me that the most serious occupation in UP was, *'Guppe Haankna'*, that is, telling of tales. The landed gentry of those days had the time and raw material for this pastime and had made it into a fine art. At such gatherings Sálim's contribution was to stoke the fires of conversation by his incisive wit. The Census Department of the Home Ministry must have been confused by what Sálim's wrote under the heading "**Profession**." 'writer of books and teller of stories',

The 1940s was still the decade when the Englishman was held in some awe by the natives and anyone who stood up to his arrogance was greatly admired by his congeners. I remember an occasion when one of the *sahibs* in the party made a thoughtless, if characteristic remark about the unsuitability of 'natives' for some position in government. Sálim turned on him with the confident though unexpected remark 'The best thing for people of your way of thinking is to leave the country and go home'. Silence reigned supreme for the rest of the evening.

The death of his wife in 1939 shattered him, and the fact that he was able to recover rather quickly was due largely to the generosity of his sister (my mother-in-law) and her husband, Hassan Ali. Soon after Tehmina's death, Sálim wrote to them demanding accommodation in their house. For nearly 45 years Sálim lived with them in their house at 33 Pali Hill, Bandra, Bombay.

It was fortunate for Sálim that during the pre-independence period many maharajas and nawabs were keen sportsmen, and though most of them preferred to have a duck on the table rather than in the bird room of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), they were very willing to support Sálim's ornithological surveys. These surveys provided the basic data for his *Handbook*, and so much has been written about these expeditions that I need not mention them here. The fact that the princes were supporting his surveys, and he often enjoyed their hospitality, was never allowed to inhibit his forthrightness. The late Maharaja of Bharatpur once said, ruefully, 'that every time Sálim Sahib comes to Bharatpur, he makes me cross off another species of duck from my menu'.

My wife and I were invited to join his camp in Palanpur, Gujarat, in 1944. The camp was sited in Bolaram, a delightful jungle, where the roar of a tiger and the sawing of the panther could still be heard. It

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was at this camp that I came to know Sálim intimately. It was fun to see the way the maharajas ate out of his hand, though it was they who provided him with the luxuries of life. During a state dinner hosted by the Nawab of Palanpur, there was a glittering assembly of royalty, and throughout the day there were sounds of cannons, announcing the arrival of some prince. From the number of booms, experts could identify the status of the guest. During the party, Sálim whispered in my ear that her 'white' Highness (the wife of HH Palanpur) was a 'negotiable document' as she had been married before to a prince and was now transferred to our host.

I was with Sálim in several camps, in Kutch, Bharatpur, Bhutan and others. In all these places there were severe inconveniences and dangers, which were rather worrying. Saw-scaled vipers were common in Kutch and the sand-flies which swarmed over your eyes made any purposeful activity difficult. But Sálim was 'least worried' as they say, and continued with removing birds from the mist nets, measuring, weighing, de-ticking and recording his findings. The ticks were collected for Teresa Clay, Meinertzhagen's niece and the well-known entomologist. Ticks often help to determine the sub-species of the host. During collecting trips to Bhutan, the stinging nettles protecting the plants were a forbidding experience, and while I often avoided any responsibility by looking the other way, Sálim walked through the bushes and recovered the birds he had shot for the reference collection.

Physically he was both tough and fearless. He told me once that it was a great joy to him to have developed himself from a puny, sickly boy into a strong physique. One discipline to which he subjected himself was never to drink water during the day. This enabled him to continue working in the 45°C heat in his camps in Kutch and other places. In fact, he often reacted unnecessarily harshly, I thought, to anyone demanding a drink or sustenance during 'office' hours in his camps. 'Office' hours, it may be noted, lasted from pre-dawn to midnight.

He was a wonderful companion when he was in the right mood, and for some reason he was extraordinarily generous to me. To give one example: he had lent me his Exacta camera, and I lost it in a taxi in Calcutta. When I went in a trembling state to report the loss, he tapped me on the shoulder and said, "we are all human and mistakes will happen". On the other hand, he could be savagely critical about minor offences.

I need hardly stress that being out with him in the field was always an education. I remember one walk with him in Borivli National Park – the Park as it was in the 1940s without the ugly artefacts which have now been put up. What a delight it was to walk through this country from Ghodbunder Road up to Kanheri Caves. Nothing could be more beautiful than the deciduous trees glossy with new foliage, and the streams tumbling beneath them. As we walked along we heard the call of the Malabar trogan. It is not often that we can hear this bird but Sálim stopped in his tracks and said that it was not the trogan but the drongo imitating the call of the trogan. This was a remarkable identification with only one ear at his disposal.

His eyes, of course, had the sharpness of an eagle. In Kihim one morning, while walking through a scrub jungle destroyed by the activities of the Thull Fertilizer Project, two yellow-wattled lapwings were seen walking furtively. It was obvious, even to me, that there was a nest around, but I had no hope of being able to discover it because it was so expertly camouflaged. The eggs match the ground colours, and the nest is just a scrape in the ground. Sálim signalled to me to stand still and he walked on. Within a few seconds he had located the nest and also a single chick some distance away.

My association with Sálim grew closer and closer. I came more and more under his wing, and he was, of course, instrumental in my climb up the conservation ladder. His irritable temper notwithstanding, he had a tremendous capacity to make and hold on to friends. World figures – Sir Landsborough Thompson, Peter Scott, Richard Fitter, Frank Fraser-Darling, and a host of others, were in close touch with him. J B S Haldane, perhaps the most versatile scientist of our age, always extolled Sálim's capacity to do fieldwork with just a pair of eyes and bare hands. No need for sophisticated technology and foreign grants.

My first serious meeting with this international group was in New Delhi in 1965, when the Government of India organised a meeting with a group of IUCN delegates who were on their way to Bangkok. The group included Sir Frank Fraser-Darling, Richard Fitter and Sir Peter Scott. I was Hon. Secretary of the BNHS, and it was during this meeting that I was invited to Lucerne to attend the ninth Triennial General Assembly of the IUCN. And it was at Lucerne that I was made a member of the Executive Board of IUCN, and I cannot deny that my connection with Sálim had much to do with it.

My connection with Sálim developed a formal side during the twelve years that I was Hon. Secretary of the BNHS, while Sálim was the President. In 1962, there was serious disagreement among the members

Kunal Verma

Dr. Salim Ali describes the common house sparrow ***(left)*** *thus: "A confirmed hanger-on of man, in hills and plains alike, whether in a bustling noisy city or outlying forest hamlet... 'song' of breeding male a loud, monotonous* tsi, tsi, tsi, *or* cheer, cheer, cheer, *uttered* ad lib *as he fluffs out his feathers, arches his rump, droops his wings and struts about arrogantly, twitching his partly cocked tail." *Will we ever again be blessed with an ornithologist who would have nearly as eloquent, almost whimsical, a turn of phrase?*

of the Executive Committee of the BNHS about the priorities of the Society. The committee consisted among others, of three retired members of the Indian Civil Service who were, by their training and background, *'Lakir Ke Fakir'* – literal followers of the written word. So when Sálim wanted to use the services of the staff of the bird room and the reference collection for his bird-banding trips, some members of the committee objected on the ground that the Grant from the Government of Maharashtra, which enabled the Society to maintain the staff, could not be diverted for fieldwork. The staff had to stay put in the office of the BNHS, dusting and fumigating the specimens.

Sálim's view was that taxonomical work had been largely accomplished, and what was required was information about the living bird and its ecology. This would, in fact, give 'life' to the dead specimens in the reference collection. The dispute became so serious that first Sálim resigned as President, then the Hon. Secretary resigned. After this Sálim requested me to become the Hon. Secretary of the BNHS. My principal task was to pour oil over troubled waters – a task at which I succeeded only partially.

Naturalists everywhere have an egocentric view of the world, and are not willing to abide by the discipline of a committee. Unfortunately Sálim , in spite of his pre-eminence as a naturalist and author, was not a good Chairman, and left the onerous task of conducting the meetings to me. He told me once that attending these meetings were some of the more unhappy experiences of his life.

One problem which Sálim faced when he started his monumental ten volume *Handbook* was to find a suitable typist – someone who would not be bewildered by the scientific names of birds. Several of the probationers were found to be unsuitable. I then suggested to the committee that we loan our librarian and senior steno, J S Serrao, to Sálim to help him with his book.

Surprisingly, this created a storm and they insisted that he could not be given to Sálim for his personal work. It was an extraordinary attitude and I pointed out that the completed work would enhance the standing of the Society. Fortunately, as Hon Secretary I was able to release Serrao for Sálim's work. Serrao with his unfailing memory, meticulous typing, and tremendous admiration for Sálim, did a splendid job. When the last volume was completed, a beaming Serrao came to me and showed me a cheque for Rs. 1000 which Sálim had given him in appreciation of his work.

At the end of 1973, my wife and I decided that we had had enough of Bombay, its high-rise threats and other unfortunate developments. So we moved to Bangalore and my active connection with the BNHS came to an end.

My personal bonds with Sálim continued and we were happy that after the death of her parents, my wife suggested that he should make his home in her house in Kihim. He had once told her that this was the landscape he loved best in the world. It was the right place for him to end his days. ❍