

Salim Ali

Salim Moizuddin Abdul Ali (12 November 1896 – 20 June 1987) was an Indian ornithologist and naturalist. Sometimes referred to as the "**birdman of India**", Salim Ali was among the first Indians to conduct systematic bird surveys across India and his bird books helped develop ornithology. He became the key figure behind the **Bombay Natural History Society** after 1947 and used his personal influence to garner government support for the organisation, create the **Bharatpur bird sanctuary** (Keoladeo National Park) and prevent the destruction of what is now the Silent Valley National Park. He was awarded the **Padma Bhushan in 1958** and the **Padma Vibhushan in 1976**, India's third and second highest civilian honours respectively.

Salim Ali was born into a Sulaimani Bohra Muslim family of Bombay, the ninth and youngest child. His father **Moizuddin** died when he was one year old and his mother **Zeenat-un-nissa** died when he was three. The children were brought up by his maternal uncle, **Amiruddin Tyabji**, and childless aunt, **Hamida Begum**, in a middle-class household in Khetwadi, Mumbai. Another uncle was **Abbas Tyabji**, well known Indian freedom fighter. Salim was introduced to the serious study of birds by **W. S. Millard**, secretary of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), who identified an unusually coloured sparrow that young Salim had shot for sport with his toy air gun. Millard identified it as a **yellow-throated sparrow**, and showed Salim around the Society's collection of stuffed birds. Millard lent Salim a few books including Eha's *Common birds of Bombay*, encouraged Salim to make a collection of birds and offered to train him in skinning and preservation. Millard also introduced young Salim to (later Sir) Norman Boyd Kinnear, the first paid curator at the BNHS, who later provided help from the British Museum. In his **autobiography, *The Fall of a Sparrow***, Ali notes the yellow-throated sparrow event as the turning point of his life that led His early interest was in books on hunting in India and he became interested in sport-shooting, encouraged by the hunting interests of his foster-father Amiruddin. Shooting contests were often held in the neighbourhood in which he grew and among his playmates was Iskandar Mirza, a distant cousin who was a particularly good marksman and who went on in later life to become the first President of Pakistan.

Salim went to primary school at **Zenana Bible and Medical Mission High School** at Girgaum then at St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. He was to study commercial law and accountancy at **Davar's College of Commerce**. His true interest was however noticed by Father Ethelbert Blatter at **St. Xavier's College** and was persuaded to study zoology. After attending morning classes at Davar's College, he began to attend zoology classes at St. Xavier's College and was able to complete the course in zoology. During this break in Bombay he was married to a distant relative, **Tehmina** in December 1918.

He was accompanied and supported on his early ornithological surveys by his wife, Tehmina, and was shattered when she died in 1939 following a minor surgery. After Tehmina's death in 1939, Salim Ali stayed with his sister **Kamoo** and brother-in-law. In the course of his later travels, Ali rediscovered the Kumaon Terai population of the Finn's baya but was unsuccessful in his expedition to find the mountain quail (*Ophrysia superciliosa*), the status of which continues to remain unknown.

Ali later wrote that his interest was in the "living bird in its natural environment."

Dr. Ali was a frequent visitor to The Doon School where he was an engaging and persuasive advocate of ornithology to successive generations of pupils. As a consequence, he was considered to be part of the Dosco fraternity and became one of the very few people to be made an honorary member of *The Doon School Old Boys Society*.

Although recognition came late, he received several honorary doctorates and numerous awards. The earliest was the "**Joy Gobinda Law Gold Medal**" in 1953, awarded by the Asiatic Society of Bengal and was based on an appraisal of his work by Sunder Lal Hora (and in 1970 received the **Sunder Lal Hora memorial Medal** of the Indian National Science Academy). He received honorary **doctorates** from the Aligarh Muslim University (1958), Delhi University (1973) and Andhra University (1978). In 1967 he became the first non-British citizen to receive the **Gold Medal** of the British Ornithologists' Union. In the same year, he received the **J. Paul Getty Wildlife Conservation Prize** consisting of a sum of \$100,000, which he used to form the corpus of the Salim Ali Nature Conservation Fund. In 1969 he received the **John C. Phillips memorial medal** of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. The USSR Academy of Medical Sciences gave him the **Pavlovsky Centenary Memorial Medal** in 1973 and in the same year he was made Commander of the **Netherlands Order of the Golden Ark** by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands. The Indian government decorated him with a **Padma Bhushan** in 1958 and the **Padma Vibhushan** in 1976. He was also nominated to the **Rajya Sabha** in 1985.

Dr. Salim Ali **died in 1987**, at the age of **91** after a prolonged battle with prostate cancer in Mumbai. In 1990, the **Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON)** was established at **Coimbatore** by the **Government of India**. Pondicherry University established the **Salim Ali School of Ecology and Environmental Sciences**. The government of Goa set up the **Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary** and the Thattakad bird sanctuary near Vembanad in Kerala also goes by his name. The location of the BNHS in Bombay was renamed to "**Dr Salim Ali Chowk**". In 1972, Kittu Thonglongya discovered a misidentified specimen in the collection of the BNHS and described a new species that he called *Latidens salimalii*, considered one of the world's rarest bats, and the only species in the genus *Latidens*. The subspecies of the rock bush quail (*Perdica argoondah salimalii*) and the eastern population of Finn's weaver (*Ploceus megarhynchus salimalii*) were named after him by Whistler and Abdulali respectively. A

subspecies of the black-rumped flameback woodpecker (*Dinopium benghalense tehminae*) was named after his wife, Tehmina, by Whistler and Kinnear.

Salim Ali wrote numerous journal articles, chiefly in the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*. A popular article that he wrote in 1930 *Stopping by the woods on a Sunday morning* was reprinted in *The Indian Express* on his birthday in 1984. His most popular work was *The Book of Indian Birds*, written in the style of Whistler's *Popular Handbook of Birds*, first published in 1941 and subsequently translated into several languages with numerous editions. His *magnum opus* was however the **10 volume Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan** written with Dillon Ripley and often referred to as "the handbook". This work started in 1964 and ended in 1974 with a second edition completed after his death by others, notably J S Serrao of the BNHS, Bruce Beehler, Michel Desfayes and Pamela Rasmussen. He also produced a number of regional field guides, including "**The Birds of Kerala**" (the first edition in 1953 was titled "The Birds of Travancore and Cochin"), "**The Birds of Sikkim**", "**The Birds of Kutch**" (later "The Birds of Gujarat"), "**Indian Hill Birds**" and the "**Birds of the Eastern Himalayas**". Several low-cost books were produced by the National Book Trust including "**Common Birds**" (1967) written with his niece Laeeq Futehally which was reprinted in several editions with translations into Hindi and other languages. In 1985 he wrote his autobiography, *The Fall of a Sparrow*. Ali also wrote about his own vision for the Bombay Natural History Society, noting the importance of conservation related activities. In the 1986 issue of the *Journal* of the BNHS he noted the role that it had played, the changing interests from hunting to conservation captured in 64 volumes that were preserved in microfiche copies, and the zenith that it had reached under the exceptional editorship of S H Prater.

A two-volume compilation of his shorter letters and writings was published in 2007, edited by **Tara Gandhi**, one of his last students.

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