

**B**orn on November 12, 1896 in Mumbai, Sálím Ali's early interests were hunting and books on hunting in India. With a Daisy air gun at his disposal, Sálím Ali would go about shooting birds around his home. From hunting, Ali got hooked onto the study of birds through a visit to the BNHS. He had ventured into the Society intrigued by a sparrow that he had shot, which had a yellow patch on its throat. There he met W.S. Millard, who not only identified the bird as the Yellow-throated Sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis*, but also most kindly took the timid boy around the Society's collection of stuffed birds and lent him a few books. The rest, as they say, was fate, and thus was born 'The Birdman of India'. There was, indeed, "a strange providence" in the fall of that sparrow!

Having dropped out of college after the very first year, Sálím Ali went to Tavoy, Burma, in 1919 to manage the family's wolfram (tungsten) mining and timber business. He spent a lot of time in the surrounding forests and these excursions not

only improved his hunting skills but also developed his awareness about natural history. He soon became well acquainted with the Forest Department officials J.C. Hopwood and Berthold Ribbentrop. Sálím Ali learnt a lot from Hopwood about the birds of Burma, which helped him to refine his birding skills. After the business in Burma failed, Sálím Ali

returned to Bombay and under the guidance of Revd Fr. Blatter, head of the Biology department at St. Xavier's College, graduated in Zoology. Subsequently, he applied for the post of ornithologist in the Zoological Survey of India, but was rejected, which turned out to be a fortuitous and colossal gain for the BNHS!

In 1926, Sálím Ali was appointed as a guide lecturer at the newly opened Natural History Section of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India that was under the management of the BNHS. Later, realizing that it was important to pursue further studies to take up ornithology as a profession, he went on a study trip to train under Professor Erwin Stresemann at the Berlin Museum. In 1930, he took to field ornithology, through a detailed study on the polygamous breeding habits of the Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus* at Kihim, which was the first serious study of bird behaviour in India (see *JBNHS* Vol. 34(4): 947-97).

And after that Sálím Ali spent most of his adult life with the Society, travelling the length and breadth

## Sálím Ali Birdman of India



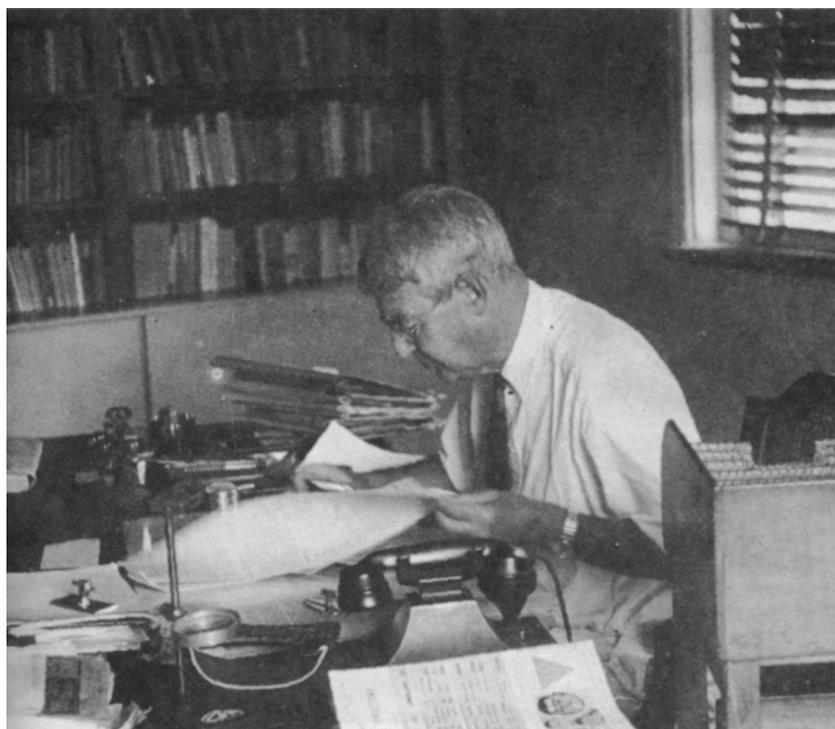
Indian Wild Ass, a special collection by Sálím Ali, being weighed against known-weight 'domestics' in Kutch in 1943

of India searching for and studying birds. He carried out bird surveys before Independence, of the states of Hyderabad (1931–32), Travancore and Cochin (1933), Central India (Bhopal, Gwalior, Indore, and Dhar) (1938), Mysore (1939–40), Kutch (1943–44), and Gujarat (1944–48), which were published in a series of articles in the *JBNHS* (Hyderabad: Vol. 36, 37 in five parts, Travancore and Cochin: Vol. 37–39 in eight parts, Central India: Vol. 41 in two parts, Mysore: Vol. 43, 44 in five parts, Kutch and Gujarat: Vol. 52 in two parts). The surveys culminated in the books *THE BIRDS OF KUTCH* (1945), *INDIAN HILL BIRDS* (1949), and *THE BIRDS OF TRAVANCORE AND COCHIN* in (1953) (revised and renamed *BIRDS OF KERALA* in 1968). Ali also carried out surveys of Orissa (1948–49), Berar (1951), Sikkim (1952–53), Bhutan (1966–69), Goa (1972), and Arunachal Pradesh (1979–82) after Independence. The results of these latter surveys were not published, though the Sikkim survey gave rise to *THE BIRDS OF SIKKIM* (1962), and the Bhutan survey to *THE BIRDS OF THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS*, written in collaboration with S. Dillon Ripley of the Smithsonian Institution, USA.

Other than these books, Sálím Ali made a seminal contribution to Indian ornithology by the publication of the *HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN* (1968–75), popularly referred to as the *HANDBOOK*, which he co-authored with Dillon Ripley. At the time when Sálím Ali joined the BNHS, scientific ornithology mainly focused on taxonomy. It was he who drew attention to the need for field observations on birds. The notes he recorded paved the way for his masterpiece, the 10-volume *HANDBOOK*. With S. Dillon Ripley focusing on taxonomy, Sálím Ali on



R.E. Hawkins (L) amuses an audience gathered to celebrate the release of the *HANDBOOK*, Vol. 10. Among the amused listeners of the limerick are Sálím Ali (R), Ravi Dayal (centre), and Mrs. Indira Gandhi



The association between R.E. Hawkins and Sálím Ali laid the foundation for a long-standing partnership between BNHS and Oxford University Press

ecology, and with reference to Hugh Whistler's meticulous bird notes, this massive tome took 10 years (1964 to 1974) to complete, and after more than 40 years, it is still referred to by scientists and birders alike. He was instrumental in popularizing birdwatching and triggering an

interest in the birds of India through his *THE BOOK OF INDIAN BIRDS*, first published in 1941 and now in its 13th edition, and which has also been translated into Hindi.

Sálím Ali, who was active in the conservation movement in India, helped BNHS greatly through his close



Tree planting on the Society's land at Goregaon



Being presented the Padma Vibhushan by the President of India Dr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, 3rd April, 1976

ties with the former Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, both of whom had personal copies of *THE BOOK OF INDIAN BIRDS*. He was instrumental in getting the Keoladeo National Park declared as a protected area and in saving the pristine Silent Valley in Kerala. He also persuaded Indira Gandhi to reject the permission sought for falconry expeditions by Arab sheikhs targeting the Houbara Bustard in Rajasthan.

"If I hemmed and hawed in search of an excuse for having forgotten the task I had to do, Sálím Ali would smartly slap the arm of his chair in exasperation, a displacement activity which struck one where it should. The small eruption of anger over, he would admonish "That is why I have been repeatedly asking you to note down things." One could not afford to make a habit of forgetfulness or finding excuses. You were then labelled "unreliable" and consigned to the dust heap. He was a perfectionist who could not bear the general national attitude of *Jaane do* (= let it go). Seeing him in one of his moods of frustration at failing to get his staff to achieve, reminded one of the temper tantrums of Pandit Nehru at the shoddiness that surrounded him or Gandhiji's efforts to have his countrymen dig and use trench latrines. Their countrymen appreciated the anxiety for perfection and being unable to live up to the standards did the next best thing, elevated them into the nation's Pantheon of saints. Perhaps that is what is happening to Sálím Ali. He was by no means a saint, nor was Pandit Nehru nor Gandhiji.

Those of us who had worked with him over the years remember him not as the mellow and gentle old man of the TV and news media but as the tough and determined perfectionist who had deliberately set his foot on a path away from the mundane 'normal' path of conventionality. A man who would not listen to reason but set out jauntily to do what he wanted to do and not what other people wanted him to do. He was a non-conformist.

His abiding grace was his delightful sense of humour and the humility which made his hackles rise at fulsome praise."

... J.C. Daniel

Sálím Ali was a non-conformist. He was methodical in his work, and in almost everything he did. He had a clear and elegant handwriting, was a gifted writer, and had a mastery of the English language. He was simple, frugal, ate little, and was extremely strict with funds. A true conservationist, he ensured that a rupee given by a donor went a long way. He was known for his humility and delightful humour, but was also dreaded for his explosive temper and sarcastic wit, these reserved for the pretenders, the pompous, and those who did shoddy work. Sálím Ali devoted his life to work and to the Society. He gifted all that he had to the Society, including the money he received from the Paul Getty Award

(1975) to establish scholarship funds, and the royalties from his books to the Society.

Despite all his fame, he was a modest man. "I feel all this talk about world-wide renown and so on is fictitious. In the context of world ornithology, the work we have done here is nothing. I feel like a frog in the well or a one-eyed man in the land of the blind," he is supposed to have once remarked. But to this day, Sálím Ali's name continues to be synonymous with bird study in India. For more insights into the personality of this man, his life, work and association with Indian Ornithology and the BNHS, read his autobiography, *THE FALL OF A SPARROW*. ■