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[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

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## **Towards Ecological Indianness: Salim Ali's Autobiography and the Evolution of Green Citizenship in Twentieth Century India**

**Rajarshi Mitra**

PhD Scholar,  
EFL University, Hyderabad.

Few autobiographies of Indian men of science are as witty as Salim Ali's *The Fall of A Sparrow* (1985). At times lively, at times dramatic and passionate Salim Ali's autobiography has been in print ever since its publication in 1985. Born in the final years of the nineteenth century Salim Ali lived for nearly ninety years becoming one of the most important Indian naturalists. He was respected widely and honoured by the prominent personalities of his era. His bird books became staple bestsellers. He received the highest civilian honour Padma Vibhushan from the Indian government and The Paul Getty Wildlife Conservation Prize; considered the Nobel Prize for conservation efforts, for 1975. This paper looks at the career of Salim Ali, India's bird man, and his contribution to the concept of ecological citizenship. The paper argues that in his autobiography *The Fall of A Sparrow* (1985) Salim Ali was fashioning for himself the identity of a green citizenship as an answer to the various antagonistic ideological views against his vocation as a bird watcher. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part of the paper deals with the socio-cultural context of Salim Ali's career establishing him as an "odd" national figure. The second part analyses the themes of ecological citizenship Salim Ali had hinted at in his autobiography *The Fall of A Sparrow* (1985). The first part of my paper argues that in post green revolution India, not only nature but also identities associated with nature were under threat. In the second part I argue that Salim Ali was fashioning the figure of an ecological citizen as an answer to this threat.

### **Salim Ali the National Figure**

A random search on the web reveals several links for Salim Ali. There are at least two organizations named after him: SACON (Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology) in Coimbatore and SAF (Salim Ali Foundation) in Kerala. Apart from these organizations there are two forests – Salim Ali National Park in Srinagar, Kashmir and Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary in Panjim, Goa. The SACON and SAF websites project Salim Ali as the inspiration behind their endeavour to preserve India's biodiversity which was the exact reason that made Salim Ali spend his whole life travelling in remote corners of India looking for birds. Salim Ali was a prolific writer and several of his volumes are still on print. The most popular of his books remains to be the multi-volume *Birds of India and Pakistan* which he co-wrote with his friend Dillon Ripley. The lively prose he had developed in books like *Common Birds* (1967) or *Book of Indian Birds* (1941) has made A K Mehrotra choose him as one of the five major Indian nature writers in his *Illustrated History of Indian English Literature*. Mehrotra praises Salim's wit, irreverence and multi-facetedness. Salim is a sort of writer, Mehrotra writes, "whose accounts of people are no less interesting than those of birds (2003: 358)".

In post independent India Salim Ali became a legend. After his death in 1987, his old friend and long time colleague Dillon Ripley wrote in an *In Memoriam*:

Ali was born in Bombay on 12 November 1896. Beginning in the 1930s, Salim Ali's books constituted the first effort by an Indian citizen to educate the population of the soon-to-be independent republics of Britain's Indian Empire to their responsibilities as guardians of nature.

His insights into the dangers to which nature would be increasingly subjected surmounted politics. The depth of his concern represented a universal language and transcended national responsibilities. He was, indeed, the father of Asian ecological understanding.

- (1988: 772)

Ripley places Ali within a complex domain of nationalism and internationalism. In Ripley's vision Salim's achievement as a naturalist is linked to the ethics of proper management of the postcolonial nation. Ali is portrayed as a guardian figure building a young nation ecologically. Also significant is Ripley's envisioning of Salim Ali's writings as an apolitical record of the world – which according to Ripley, makes him universal.

Interestingly the very politics Ripley rejects haunted Salim Ali his whole life. He often found it hard to explain his trade – bird watching - in the post-colonial India where any scientific or artistic pursuit, according to a narrow social logic, had to contribute to national progress. In fact green revolution of the seventies proved how science could be used to help India feed her ever hungry population of millions. In an India of terrorism, regional rebellion and famine Salim, with his refined idea of a naturalist, was a misfit. By the time Salim was penning his autobiography questions were being raised about the efficacy of non-utilitarian social and cultural practices in India. What was science if it was not helping in the alleviation of poverty or in quelling rebellions raging all across India? Some of these questions came up during an interview Salim Ali gave to *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (1985), which was running a cover story on him. The same issue also carried a long analysis of India's slow economic growth. Salim groped for answer to a rather rude question put to him by the journalist Prithvi Nandy:

*But don't you sometimes feel that the genteel art of birdwatching seems so anachronistic in our age as violence and strife keep on mounting and the pressures of survival marginalize the poetry of our lives? Who cares whether the mountain quail exists or not, when the terrorist strikes and the famine kills millions?*

These are all the same process of living and dying. You cannot see them in isolation. When you neglect one form of life, you neglect all forms of life. A killer is a killer. Whether he destroys a rare species of birds or he kills a person in cold blood. We must learn to see life as one.

*That's a philosophical answer.*

It was a philosophical question.

- (1985: 17)

The cover story contained two excerpts from his soon to be published autobiography *The Fall of a Sparrow* (1985). The first excerpt, lifted from the first chapter of the autobiography, discusses Salim Ali's childhood interest in birds and his slow maturity into a young man interested in natural history. The second excerpt is from the most interesting last chapter of his autobiography titled "Thrills of Birdwatching". In this last chapter Salim Ali explains how ornithology could be an adventurous pastime. He records the different thrilling experiences he has had in his life as an ornithologist and recommends birdwatching as a peaceful "civilized outdoor activity" through which the rich biological diversity of India could be known (1985: 223). Ali's efforts as a birdwatcher and bird writer from the very beginning of his career had been national in his scope and vision. Most of his books are about regional surveys he had conducted in some parts of India, for example his *Indian Hill Birds* (1969) describes the native birds found in the Himalayas and the Western Ghats. In other words all along he was doing in his own way what other national leaders were doing - he was creating his own vision of India as a birder's paradise. He was also envisioning himself as a saviour of the bird species in India:

*I was only wondering if you do not occasionally feel that your role as an ornithologist is marginal in a society where violence, threat and destruction rule with such a firm, sure hand. I am sure every poet, musician, painter faces this dilemma today. What can one do to change the quality of our lives?*

Do just what you are capable of. The world will take care of itself. One must learn to be constructive.

*That's an easy platitude.*

Not really, when you believe in it.

...

When one reaches 89, as I have done, you have seen a lot, experienced a lot. You don't give up things easily.

...

*Not even when you feel that you are a voice in wilderness?*

No, I love the wilderness.

(Nandy 1985: 17)

The kind of India and the kind of self Salim Ali was advocating for were already being echoed by some of his contemporaries. Madhaviah Krishnan (1912 – 1996), another prolific nature writer, hinted at the concept of ecological citizenship in his article “Ecological Patriotism”. Krishnan broadly deals with four issues: richness of Indian nature, concern for the depleting forest cover, possibilities of ecological regeneration of India and probable solution to the ecological problems. We can arrange Krishnan's vision of ecological patriotism under three different heads. Firstly, Krishnan is evaluating one's relationship with one's setting, secondly, Krishnan is advocating for the creation of a benevolent, socio-political network that would look after nature and lastly, Krishnan wants to develop a sense of a patriotic ecological every day. Saving India's biodiversity, according to Krishnan, becomes another way of safeguarding one's Indianness (Krishnan 2001: 253).

Taking cues from Krishnan I will analyse the concept of ecological citizenship in Salim Ali's autobiography as comprising of different practices that endear a person to his/her nation. I have already argued that the notion of ecological citizenship was under threat by the time Salim Ali was writing his autobiography. In the second part of my paper I would argue that in Ali's autobiography there could be discerned narrative efforts to fashion a responsible ecological citizenship.

### **Ali's Autobiography and Ecological Citizenship**

Salim Ali wrote his autobiography to record his evolution from a young school boy interested in birds to a celebrated ornithologist. Like most other Indian autobiographies *Fall of the Sparrow* contains memorable bits about Salim's life, his influences, his travels and his activities. All these could be brought under the three thematic heads under which I have divided Krishnan's essay. I will only hint at how Salim Ali's autobiography could be arranged under these heads without offering extensive explanation.

### **Setting: Nation and an Ornithologist**

Indian autobiographies have often provided personal viewpoints about nation and its history. Two classic modern Indian autobiographies – *My Experiments with Truth* by M K Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru's *Autobiography* - deal with the writers' personal attachment to the nation. For a nature writer like Salim Ali setting is all the more important. Naturalists generally reveal their intimacy with the landscape by various means. In Ali's case, intimacy with Indian

landscape is produced through his physical presence at a particular part of the nation. The journey in search of some bird is presented as a form of inner journey to understand one's Indianness. The title "An Ornithological Pilgrimage to Manas Sarovar" hints at such a journey. Salim's awareness of the zoo-geographical character of a particular place also shows his intimacy with the diversity of the nation. His movement from one part of the country to another is also marked by the human connections he picks up on the way.

### **The Social Network**

The human connections are necessary to understand the relevance of Salim Ali's vocation as an ornithologist. The 1985 edition of the autobiography contains twenty pages of photographs documenting in chronological order Salim Ali's life history. Initial photographs show him as part of a family. Slowly as time proceeds he stands out, sometimes alone in the company of birds, sometimes in the company of illustrious national leaders like Indira Gandhi, or his famous friends like Loke Wan Theo. There is this sense that ornithology as an apolitical vocation brings under its rubric a community of people without discriminating the social and sometimes national boundaries. But why does an apolitical vocation appeal to such a wide variety of personalities? Salim answers this question by glossing on the idea of what I would consider an everyday on the field.

### **The Ornithological Everyday**

The last chapter of Salim Ali's autobiography is about the thrills of field work in ornithology. The idea is to counter the charge of boredom against ornithology. In other words here Salim Ali explains the entertainment value of bird watching. He explains that the thrill lies in one's journey to a rough part of the country, in discovering birds, in watching the minute little things a bird does and in sudden dangers in the landscape that might threaten one's life. What Salim Ali means by the thrills of birdwatching is the heightened emotional effect of birdwatching on the birdwatcher. The everyday experience of bird watching is a conglomerate experience of joy, sorrow, humor, disappointment, escapism, hope and fear. Birdwatching then contains the entire gamut of human emotional experience and it is ennobling because of its non materialist and escapist character:

I have watched birds through half a century and more, chiefly for the pleasure and elation of the spirit they have afforded. Birdwatching provided the excuse for removing myself to where every prospect pleases – up in the mountains or deep in the jungles – away from the noisy rough and tumble of the dubious civilization of this mechanical high speed age. A form of escapism, maybe, but one that hardly needs justification.

- (1985: 227)

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that Salim Ali's autobiography was an exercise in the justification of his lifelong vocation as a birdwatcher. In doing so he was developing the idea of an ecological citizenship – a sort of Indian who would value the nature for its own sake and not for any other utilitarian reason. Hence he formulated an idea of birdwatching that would also resonate at the levels of nationalism and non-material philosophy. This citizenship would be rewarding because of its apolitical thrills.

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