

## In this issue

### Sálím Ali and the project 'Lifescape'

A special section is included in this issue of *Current Science* to mark the occasion of the birth centenary of the late Dr Sálím Ali – ornithologist extraordinary, naturalist par excellence, a great popularizer of natural history, a most inspiring teacher.

The project 'Lifescape', launched by the Indian Academy of Sciences to celebrate the birth centenary of Dr Sálím Ali, has been described by Madhav Gadgil on page 688. To begin with, this project plans to publish illustrated accounts of 2500–5000 species of living organisms – from the lowly viruses, bacteria, algae, fungi, through mites, insects, spiders and ferns, up to reptiles, birds, mammals and trees – found in the different parts of India. This exercise, even by itself, would be a fitting tribute to the memory of Dr Sálím Ali, who had remarked that 'the absence of illustrated books was, in my opinion, the most serious obstacle to the development of bird-watching ...'. Though Dr Sálím Ali completely demolished this obstacle by writing a series of outstanding books as far as birds are concerned, the drawbacks continue to be serious for other, less glamorous creatures. Now, though some are certainly more equal, all living organisms are equal – especially in the light of the Rio summit and the Biodiversity Convention. Preparation of such illustrated accounts of different groups of living organisms is in fact a fundamental necessity for fulfilling our national mandate of inventorying and monitoring biodiversity. (Of course, this could, in the process, lead to the discovery of the locations of rare, endangered but commercially highly lu-

crative species – and thus possibly abet the violation of the third mandate of conserving biodiversity; but it is an acceptable risk.)

However, these illustrated accounts are also meant to be the thin end of the wedge, aimed at enhancing the quality of science education in the country, to begin with, by suitable alterations in the syllabi. It is well-known that the study of biology, from the school level right up to the post-graduate level, places great emphasis on the text-book/laboratory approach – to the almost exclusion of the living world around us (though there are welcome signs of change, especially with the rising importance of environmental science). Madhav Gadgil points out that studying the living should be at least as important as studying the dead (i.e. watching birds, counting butterflies and collecting seeds should be as important as dissecting frogs). Students would no doubt wholeheartedly embrace this point of view! In his autobiography *The Fall of a Sparrow*, Dr Sálím Ali describes how, as a schoolboy, 'watching the behaviour and actions of his pet birds for hours together gave immense joy ...' and 'found this to be a far more pleasant way of passing time than doing homework'. And the new syllabus proposed in the article makes sure that not just homework, but even classwork involves activities of this kind. (It is tempting to speculate if students are opposed to classwork/homework per se, regardless of the intrinsic merit or interest of the topic. Assuming that the new syllabus is implemented, would the students a few generations from now equally wholeheartedly welcome a change from this crazy pursuit of creepy-crawlies in slushy swamps in pouring rain to the air-conditioned

comforts of dissecting a frog on the computer screen, using the latest virtual-reality software obtained by surfing on the internet.)

But, coming back to the Lifescape project, curriculum development is just one of its objectives. The more important goal is the compilation of the invaluable information generated from such studies involving projects by school, college and university students. For a nation as vast and as richly diverse as India, it is impossible either for the government or for any other central agency to collect country-wide information on location, distribution, abundance, etc. even for species of great economic importance – pests, pollinators, disease vectors and the like. On the other hand, student projects bring in thousands (if not more) of highly enthusiastic and motivated volunteers, who for weeks together would cheerfully brave all hardships of working in inaccessible places at unearthly hours, and generate high-quality information, while educating themselves about many subdisciplines of biology in the process. The article also describes in depth the philosophical underpinnings, the national status and the logistic aspects of the project.

A tribute to Dr Sálím Ali by one of his close associates J. C. Daniels, reproduced on page 686 of this issue, brings out the continued reverence felt towards the 'Old Man' by his colleagues and students. Of particular relevance is the description of gravity and care exercised by Dr Sálím Ali in the handling of public funds, a trait extremely worthy of emulation. Daniels also brings out the sense of wonder evoked by the enormous amount of valuable scientific information generated by Dr Sálím Ali,

with little more paraphernalia than a notebook, a pencil and a pair of binoculars (but then there was his extremely alert and analytical mind).

A brief sketch highlighting the quintessential features of Sálím Ali, the scientist, by Madhav Gadgil (page 685) describes Sálím Ali as 'the greatest whole organism biologist of 20th Century India' – (Now the phrase 'whole-organism-biologist' is a curious one – making one wonder if it includes those who work on whole viruses, whole bacteria and the like, and conjures up images of 'whole-molecule chemists' and 'whole-membrane-biophysicists' scoffing

at the lesser mortals who work merely on the constituent parts). Beginning with the description of an important experiment conducted by Dr Sálím Ali when he was all of eleven years old, the article traces his scientific career from Burma to Berlin to Bombay Natural History Society. It is interesting that the Burma stint was triggered by the evils of mathematics (logarithms and higher algebra) being taught in the first year of college. Mathematics thus seems to have made singularly important (and alas, totally unrecognized) contributions to the study of the ecology of the birds of Burma. The write-up also emphasizes what a pleasurable

reading Dr Sálím Ali's books make.

Talking about the status of ornithology in India in the 1920–1930, Dr Sálím Ali had described it as the 'Cinderella of Indian Zoology'. As of 1996, this poor sister has been magically transformed into a princess (if not the queen). There can be no doubt that this magic spell was cast almost entirely by a single individual. In the words of R. E. Hawkins

William Shakespeare's a master of words  
And a tusker a leader of herds  
But wherever you fare  
Over land, sea or air  
Sálím Ali is the raja of birds.

N. V. Joshi

## Current Science

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