



Creating the Nation's first BioPark

National Zoological Park · Smithsonian Institution · Washington, D.C. 20008-2598

Letter From the Desk of David Challinor
March 1996

In mid-February I spent a week in Bombay for the Salim Ali Centenary Seminar on Conservation of Avifauna of Wetlands and Grasslands, having been invited to give an illustrated lecture on Salim Ali and the Smithsonian following the opening session. Salim Ali, the great Indian ornithologist, died in 1987 at the age of 90; for 40 years he collaborated with Dillon Ripley in studying the birds of the Indian subcontinent. The second edition of their monumental ten-volume Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan will be completed within the year and serves as an important current baseline for measuring the area's environmental health by using bird distribution and population size as indicators. The Handbook was truly a labor of love by two dedicated individuals who maintained a steady exchange of correspondence that now fills a dozen boxes in the Smithsonian archives.

This fortuitous collaboration began in 1944 when Ripley, on his way to his post at Mountbatten's headquarters in Sri Lanka, stopped in Bombay to look up Salim Ali. Ripley knew him only by reputation. The two men became fast friends despite their very different backgrounds and their contrasting physical appearance -- Ali was about a foot shorter. However, both came from prosperous families that could indulge their mutual passion for bird life. With peace and Indian independence in 1947, they could start in earnest their cooperative research in the avifauna of the subcontinent.

Ripley had traveled to India as a teenager before WWII, and in 1948 he led an expedition to the Himalayan foothills of Nepal to collect birds in an area that had not been explored ornithologically for a century. He had hoped to find the rare mountain quail, but failed. On Christmas Day 1948, however, he collected a male Spiney babbler from a flock of seven birds in a brushy field at 5000 feet elevation. Amazingly, this species of babbler had not been spotted by an ornithologist since the 1840's. The bird itself is thrush-sized with a pale breast and sharp pointed breast and neck feathers. Ripley delightfully recorded an account of the expedition and a description of Kathmandu in the 1940's in his book In Search of the Spiney Babbler.



Ali's interest in birds was also manifested at a young age. In 1907, when ten years old, he went to the Bombay Natural History Society (founded in 1883) to ask the curators to identify a yellow-throated sparrow he had found.

As adults Ripley and Ali not only pursued their joint studies of Indian birds, but both also held important administrative positions: Ali as President of the Bombay Natural History Society, a position he held until his death in 1987, and Ripley as Director of the Peabody Museum at Yale (1960-64) and as Secretary of the Smithsonian (1964-83). Their 40-year collaborative effort was based on mutual respect and affection. Each man was also extraordinarily generous with his time and encouragement of young people starting their scientific careers.

As a beneficiary of Ripley's kindness in nurturing my own career, I record my recollection of our first meeting to illustrate this outreach. In the spring of 1960, I was completing course requirements for a Ph.D. at the Yale Graduate School, and my part-time job at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station was to end in the fall. I climbed the steep steps in the Gothic tower of Yale's Peabody Museum where Ripley then had his bird laboratory. I knew that he was soon to be named Director of the Museum after the retirement of the incumbent. Although I had not met Ripley before, I knocked on his door and found myself facing a man of my size, slightly (seven years) older who, with a welcoming smile, bid me enter. I was flattered that he took the time to talk and listen to my interest in working at the Peabody. Although no position was then available, I kept in contact with him. In the fall after he had become Director, he offered me a part-time job as Special Assistant and Coordinator of Exhibits. As a graduate student this was about all I could handle at the time, but the position eventually blossomed into a full-time one as Deputy Director of the Museum. When Ripley went to the Smithsonian as Secretary in February 1964, I became Acting Director of the Museum for about a year, when I had to take leave to write my dissertation. During this time a new Director was appointed. With a fresh Ph.D. in the spring of 1966, I was very pleased when Ripley offered me a Smithsonian position as special assistant in tropical biology. I accepted happily and spent my first year traveling extensively in Honduras, Costa Rica and Panama. Thus I began a Smithsonian career so interesting that I would not have had the imagination to create a job so rewarding. Dedicated and confident men like Ali and Ripley willingly shared their knowledge and experience with subordinates and in so doing helped to launch new careers.

My career at the Smithsonian illustrates the benefits of having Ripley as a mentor and being so inspired, in subsequent years I became one myself. It is a truly satisfying relationship; one based on mutual affection, trust and respect from which both

parties benefit. Today, years later, I still profit from my relationship with Ripley by enjoying the numerous international connections made while working for him.

I first went to India to attend a scientific meeting in February 1971. While there Ripley and I went birding with Salim Ali on the outskirts of Delhi. A visit to Bombay on Smithsonian business followed and although I have made several short intervening visits to that city, I was amazed on my recent trip when I saw the changes of the past 25 years. The most obvious difference is the incredible growth of the city, now in excess of 12 million people and growing by five thousand a day. Bombay is truly a mega-city, replicated elsewhere in Delhi, Calcutta, Cairo, Mexico City, Saõ Paulo, et al. The trend towards urbanization will doubtless continue and India is predicted to pass China in population by the middle of the next century. One can scarcely envision the consequences of such growth, but today one has the feeling, when driving through Bombay as it stretches for miles along the coast, that life there is being lived "on the edge."

What keeps the system from collapsing? It may be the spirit and flexibility of the inhabitants. The logistics of bringing in food to feed that many people and of ridding the city of the waste generated by this frugal culture (compared to our own) are almost overwhelming. For example, the new hotel at which I stayed is about an hour's drive north of downtown during non-rush hour and is built on a long sandy beach. Unfortunately, pollution has closed the beach to swimmers, and there seems little likelihood that the conditions will soon improve. The small two-passenger, three-wheeled Vespa taxis are so ubiquitous on the main thoroughfares that they clog traffic flow and are thus banned from downtown where the narrow streets are prone to gridlock. Driving is not for the timid and horn blowing is incessant and is the approved method of warning other cars that you are about to weave in front of them. Traffic is near capacity, but any major street widening is unlikely because so many street-side dwelling families would be displaced.

Perhaps most striking to a westerner is the sight of children in their immaculate school uniforms, accompanied by mothers in breathtakingly beautiful saris, emerging from ramshackle hovels. The incongruity of seemingly prosperous people living in such apparent squalor was attributed to the simple lack of better housing even for those who could easily afford it. I saw numerous ten-story apartments under construction, but with 5,000 new inhabitants a day housing can never catch up with the demand.

Despite the seeming chaos and the highly visible substandard housing, India is by no means a Third World nation. Still the world's largest democracy, it can boast of its freely elected government. India possesses a large, energetic and dynamic middle class. The ethnic strife in our own country pales in comparison with that faced daily by Indians, yet they have managed to sustain a vigorous social, cultural, scientific and economic life. How India will develop is impossible to predict, but the rapid urbanization of the population should reduce the rate of population growth. Even if enough apartments can be built to house the hovel dwellers, there simply will not be enough space in such dwellings to raise more than one or two children.

Another noticeable change from my earlier visits is what I would call the "Indianization" of the country. Bombay is now increasingly referred to as "Mumbai," which evidently more closely matches the local pronunciation. Although most of the signage is still in English, more now seemed to be in Hindi than previously. In India, with its hundreds of dialects, English remains the lingua franca. However, I noticed at the Seminar, where all papers were in English, that many younger speakers, who had learned English locally, spoke it so rapidly (albeit fluently) and with so strong an accent that it was hard for me to understand them. This is in contrast to the friends of my generation, many of whom were educated in Britain, whose diction and sentence structure were models of clarity.

Change is inevitable and despite the apparent insurmountable problems of racial strife, a burgeoning population and political scandals (about ten cabinet ministers have resigned in the last few years on corruption charges), I am optimistic about India's future. Most Indians I have met are hard working, idealistic and pragmatic. Next year's 50th Anniversary of India's successful independence should confound the nation's critics and sustain the optimism of people like me who believe this enormous example of democratic government will survive and flourish. Americans can support India's political system by learning more about it and by broadening our personal connections with individual Indians. Just as the Ripley/Ali collaboration proved so fruitful, benefits on a national scale could result from expanding our trade with perhaps the greatest developing economic market in the world.

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