



Preface

"What, a book of folk tales?" My urbane friend asked me when I told him that I was working on a book of birds of the Bhadra river valley. He was of course making a snide remark that fork tails (meaning birds) have become folk tales (meaning tall tales). There's a story in old Hebrew surprisingly it seems written in the coarsest dialect of the language that could have been spoken only by female slaves during the time. This story is included in the older version of the Talmud which I believe today is indecipherable and long forgotten. And since this story is written in a dialect the source of the story is greatly doubted and seldom referred to in scholarly discussions. But its neglect is perhaps because its theme is even more disconcerting.

According to the story King Solomon in his middle age discovered gold in his kingdom. But unfortunately the deposit was under the basin of a river that had the most fertile delta and covered with thick forests. The forests housed a hundreds of birds and animals in addition. But the middle aged king could not resist the temptation of some of the largest ingots of gold that lay under this lush green land and went ahead with draining the river basin. When the first cache of gold was reached the lush greenery had come to be replaced by dry desert. The birds in the forest had ceased to sing.

Now, the story goes that the king had a magical ring that gave him power to communicate with the flora and fauna. The fame of the king was spread far and wide for it was thought that his ring gave him wisdom to stay abreast of events

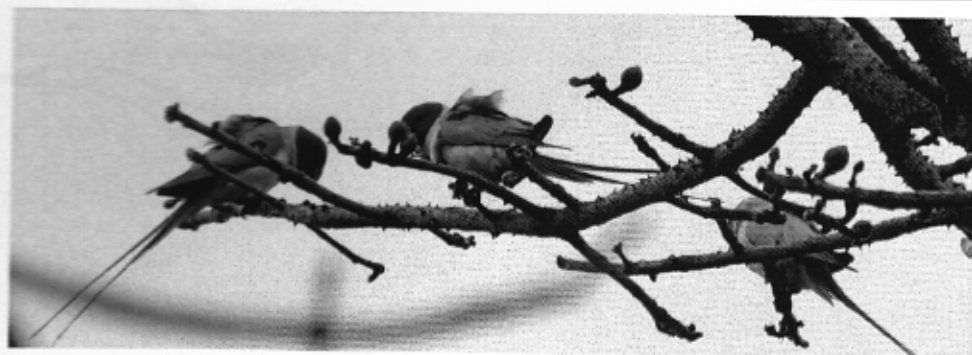


Figure 1: A pair of Plum Headed Parakeet

of the world. Every year the king would hold a festival to demonstrate his power to the people. Potentates and rivals from far off land would come to witness his prerogative and always went back surrendering to his superior powers. But on that fateful year, when the last fen had been cleared and the last bird song was lost the king found that he had lost his power to speak with nature. He was disgraced before the dignitaries who had come to attend his festival as usual.



Figure 2: Asian Paradise Flycatcher

The aging king was shaken and afraid at the turn of events. But his greatest regret was that he had lost face with his rivals and fellow men. All that the disgraced king wanted to do was hide his face from the public. Never was the festival ever held again. The king grew morose and reclusive preferring to spend his days in solitude. In his heydays the proud king had trained a handmaid to keep records of his conquests for posterity. No one in the kingdom cared to remember this story of error. But the handmaid was compelled to preserve this tale. For the king in his high moment had always insisted that she record everything truthfully. How could she be unfaithful to a king's command? She wrote it down for better or worse and in the language she spoke; and has left to us who care an archetype of man's link with nature.

After all we are like King Solomon who was wise but chased after his cache of gold and lost the special gift of nature. His dilemma crystallizes the dilemma of human relation to nature: is the cache of gold more valuable or is it the magical power to communicate with nature? This book advocates the latter and is an attempt on my part to reestablish that magical power of communication.

It will seem ironical that the following account of the avifauna is derived from field observation made in the region of a dam over the Bhadra River in Lakkavalli in Karnataka, considered to be the second highest in Asia. To build the dam a good part of the local flora and fauna had to go underwater some 50 years ago. My attempts to locate printed materials recording the avifauna before the dam was built did not draw anything concrete. Perhaps something might turn up in government archives but it would require a great deal of influence to get hold of such materials. There are archeological evidences that the area forms one of the most fertile river deltas of Southern India, possibly is the cradle of some forgotten civilization. Some 30 years ago a Paleolithic (Stone Age) site was discovered with a large cache of Stone Age relics such as arrow head shaped stones and other stone hand implements. It is possible that the Western Ghats formed a series of continental reef islands or archipelago in the Stone Age, the Deccan plateau not yet being in sight then.

The tern islands are a birder's hot spot today. These islands, formed due to submerging of natural hillocks when the river Bhadra was dammed, are situated inside the Bhadra reservoir. They remain submerged in monsoon; in late winter, when the water level goes down, the islands start to show. River tern birds arrive during this time to use the emergent islands as breeding site. Up to 300 to 400 birds can be present in a season. The terns have colonized this landmass only recently, more due to the fisheries department having set up fish breeders in the locality. It is likely that the birds were disrupted from their original nesting sites nearer the coast line (since terns mainly feed on fish), when the dam drastically changed the course of the river.



Figure 3: Building of the dam must have relocated the original nesting sites of Painted Storks to further down the river course away from the Bhadra forest in Lakkavalli

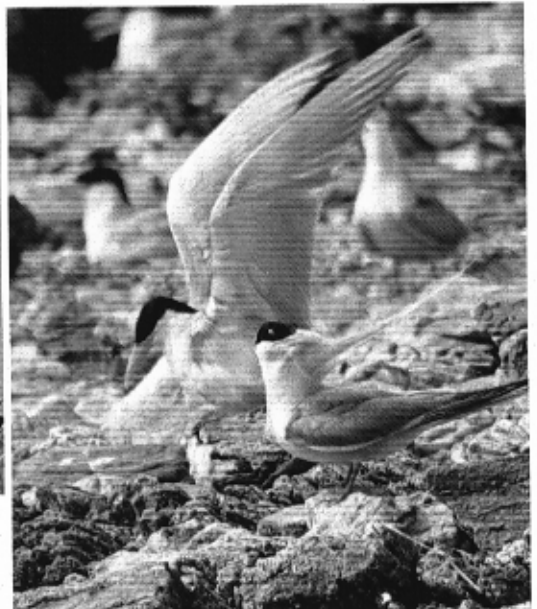


Figure 4: River Tern birds on Tern Island

The dam has considerably changed the geography of the place, since it capsized more than 11, 250, 88 hectares of delta land with forests as well as cultivation land. Until some 30 years ago one would have got to hear orally circulating stories of how the colonialists, French, Dutch and British officials made trips to the delta (before the dam was built) on hearing accounts of poachards found in large numbers in the lakes and pools in winter in the countryside. Since the delta was for eons bogland habitat of wild boars, it left many parts of it water logged and caused large expanses of water bodies ideal habitat for ducks, moorhens and other water birds. There is one account of a Dutch mercenary who came to shoot pochards and killed a child of six, a daughter of a lambani retinue that was camped across a lake. It is said that he gave away his rifle, the only thing of value he had on him on that day. That lambani clan is still called the rifle lambanis. This is of course a bit of local history with perhaps no official or written records anywhere and fast disappearing into the black holes of time. And it could well be possible that this book is an attempt to recapture a world gone by or fast disappearing.

The Bhadra River originates at Samse on the eastern side of the Sahyadri mountain ranges and flows southwards and east. These mountain ranges make up the better part of the Western Ghats in Karnataka that run continuously all along the western coast of the Southern Indian peninsula. These mountain ranges are greatly covered by dense moist forests and dotted with desolate villages. Kuvempu University campus that makes up a part of the territory under observation for this book is located in one such sleepy hamlet named Shankaraghatta on the windward side. To the South East some two kilometers away we are flanked by the frisky Bhadra River and its dammed serendipitous reservoir. Several lakes and watering holes dot the green countryside, ripe yellow from autumn to February with ripening golden ears of corn and paddy or mauve with the silk husks of growing tall sugar cane in December. On all other sides we are skirted by forests that became thicker



Figure 5: Spot Billed Duck

waters of the river laps against the western borders of these forest preserves of wild animals and birds, tigers, bears, jungle cats and deer, peacock and other birds in the Bhadra valley. This is the officially designated Bhadra Wildlife Sanctuary and a protected area under India's Wildlife Act (1975).

as one went in deeper mainly made up of wild fig, sag, sandal tree, ashoka, oak and tall bamboos. Fruit and flowering trees abound such as flame of the forest, rain tree, jasmine, silk cotton, gul, wood apples, nutmeg, mango, jack, custard apple, guava and chickoo among others. The flowering trees wafted mysterious fragrances all the year around. The catchment



Figures 6 & 7: Malabar Squirrel & Cheetal

The location in the valley formed by the hills of the mountain range and the Bhadra River basin is idyllic. It makes up a small part of the whole Nilgiri bio reserve of Southern India. The Nilgiri bio reserve itself is considered as sharing the Indo-Malayan eco zone and forming a continuum of flora and fauna in South East Asia. Bhadra is the third largest sanctuary in Karnataka and covers some 492 sq. km area. Its forests are made up of tropical moist to dry deciduous vegetation. Not far South west some 50 kilometers is the Mandagadde bird sanctuary. Even though in recent years the numbers of birds coming to nest there has come down still the areas around it are a hot-spot for many migrating birds flying towards the watering holes of Muthodi further down the south west. The Muthodi is well known as elephant camp. Sighting of open bill, ibises, storks and egrets among others in the surrounding areas is not uncommon during late winter. Bhadra and these sanctuaries provide nesting sites for many of these birds.

The wild birds and animals from the surrounding hills and river delta use our campus as detour round the year. One was always on the look out for a cheetah or a tiger led astray by cattle or a marauding rogue elephant on the warpath. The neighing of the cheetal herd come to graze among the trees would be the only evidence that they had been in your garden under the



Figure 8: Wolly Necked Stork

moonlit night or could it have been the wild boar that nosed among the tubers you planted last monsoon? At times such as this it is not uncommon to spend sleepless nights tossing to the beat of throbbing drums kept up all night by the nearby villages to keep away tigers or panthers and other preying animals from the fattening cattle sheep, goats, and fowl. Or all night one heard the disturbing far off scolding call of a cheetal caught in a hunters trap in the jungle. These were the times of excitement

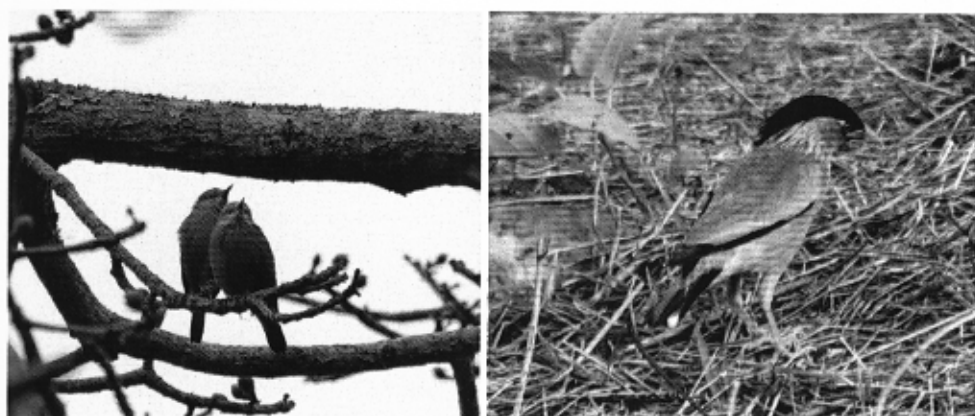
and adventure for most of us here. But closer at hand on a restless sunny afternoon in spring it is quite maddening to listen to the sweet thrush that seem to be close but never quite visible. The bold and carefree laughter of the cacophonous scimitar babbler would play upon one's ear triumphantly as celebrating a savage freedom in the near by copse of trees at the edge of habitation. This was not all. On many a rainy day in early monsoon one would wake to the yearning cries of the "mia mia" of the wild peacocks. Or in late spring one could drown in the nostalgic notes of the iora's lilting melodies. And then on evenings in November there would be the noisy parrots flying back to roost after a day in a mango grove near by and the friendly "honkitovnki" of the magnificent Malabar pied hornbill.



Figures 9 & 10: Veriditer Flycatcher & Crimson Sunbird

Expert opinion has it that winter is the best time to watch birds. But strictly this is not true and seems to be more of a convention. Winter in southern India is indeed the time for migrating birds to arrive. They come from far off Himalayas and even beyond from Europe and Siberia. There were also those which visited from nearer the Western Ghats, from the Malabar region of Kerala and even from as far south as Sri Lanka. But this may be true only for strongly annually migrating large sized birds like storks. Smaller birds such as thrush and warblers usually take a detour with breaks in their migrating cycles (or migration by relay) and will persist in nearby jungles on their migration cycles across several years. This may be true for even birds such as orioles and cuckoos. Then of course there are always the resident birds. There are birds to watch all through the year.

In the past birds have been the subjects of contemplation of persons no less than the kings and emperors like Babur and Jahangir. The Muslim invader Babur left records of the birds he saw in Hindustan in his Baburnama. In the sixteenth century Jahanghir his successor devoted many pages to Indian birds in his memoirs Jahanghirnama. The colonialists were no less awestruck by the Indian avian population. Many of them pursued it as a career such as Jerdon, Linnaeus, Tickell, Hume and Blyth. In fact the discipline of Ornithology developed in the nineteenth century out this colonial fascination with Indian birds. Such was its attraction.



Figures 21a & b: Rufous tailed & Brahminy starlings found in South India are long distance migrating

transported in between larger birds that are flying in a flock, e.g., oriental white eye and warblers. Larger birds can forcefully carry them to maintain the configuration in an area.

This book is devoted to the study of song birds. In ornithological parlance an order of about 4000 species of birds named as oscines or passers classified under Passeriformes are attributed with the capacity to sing. The song birds I have undertaken to study are not all passerines. Among those that may be viewed as passerines are the sunbirds, iora, tailor bird, thrush, wren warbler, magpie robin, flycatcher, leafbird, bulbul, scimitar babbler, tree pie and oriole. In addition I have also included the barbets (piciformes) cuckoos (cuculiformes) and doves (columbiformes). These are the song birds of South India and all of them merit the label song birds. Any orchard or forest edge here is filled with the various melodies of these birds that sing all the year round throughout daylight hours regardless of season. There are many others like the flower peckers, prinias, munias, bee eaters, shrikes and wagtails that make sweet sounds but these are the sweetest performers.

There isn't much research or writing on the song birds of India. In addition because birds are a tricky subject to observe being full of camouflage and concealment most books on bird song circulate a lot of wrong conceptions. Books that are written on the basis of laboratory experiments will never give the true nature of birds because they are based on study of birds in captivity. The observations presented in the following pages are worth the while for they are derived from watching birds in their natural everyday settings without the mediation of laboratory equipment. Chances are that these very same birds are becoming rarer as we transform the ecology for human needs with more and more elaborate technological measures. And my book could well be the last line on a world fast disappearing.

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