

Biography of nature

A collection of essays on wildlife and ecosystems with wonderful facts and inspiring prose.

BY SHEKHAR SINGH

S. THEODORE BASKARAN'S *A Day with the Shama: Essays on Nature* is one of the most remarkable books on nature published in recent times. Baskaran describes in detail the appearance, colour, calls, habits and eccentricities of various species of birds, mammals and reptiles. Similarly, various species of plants and habitats and ecosystems are described in detail. He lists the past and current threats faced by them, and the measures, if any, taken to conserve wildlife and help regenerate their population and cover.

On the face of it, this book is not dissimilar to other recent and not-so-recent publications on nature, including well-known field guides of birds, animals and trees. However, what makes this book different, and special, is that instead of the dry and factual narratives that most other publications offer, Baskaran's descriptions are refreshingly colourful. So, apart from scientific facts that fill you with a sense of wonder, you get to read a prose that inspires enthusiasm.

The descriptions are not just about the biology,

ecology or aesthetics of species and ecosystems, but contain fascinating details of the origin and meaning of names, stories regarding religious and cultural significance, historical and mythological links, citations of literary references, and details of sociological, economic and even psychological significance.

The book is divided into five sections: birds, mammals and reptiles, habitats, personalities and issues. The sections on birds, mammals and reptiles and habitats are outstanding. I have no significant issues or disagreement with the con-

tent. However, the sections on issues and personalities are contentious, though equally well-written.

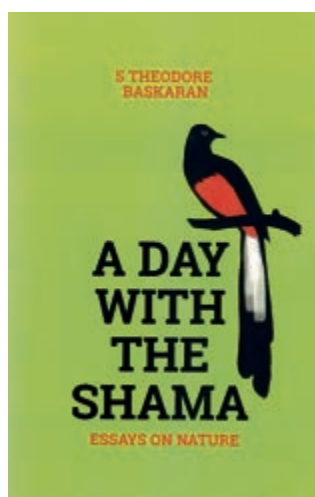
ANIMAL RIGHTS

In the chapter titled "The Book And The Man", Baskaran raises the issue of animal rights and quotes Salim Ali as saying: "I consider the current trend of conservation education given to the young on grounds of ahimsa alone—something akin to preservation of holy cows—unfortunate and totally misplaced." Baskaran observes: "We see the result of such teaching now. The conservation movement is in danger of being hijacked

by animal rights, and with disastrous results" (page 177).

It is interesting that out of the hundreds of relevant things that Salim Ali said, Baskaran picked this one to highlight. The fact is that he seems to have misunderstood what Salim Ali said. Salim Ali did not talk of animal rights but of "holy cow" ahimsa. He questioned the desirability of basing conservation education solely on the "holy cow" philosophy. This, in itself, does not seem unreasonable, though one could question whether this is actually happening. Baskaran, on the other hand, seems to understand a concern about ahimsa, and that too of the cow worship variety, to mean animal rights. The animal rights movement in India, although still in its nascent stages, is mostly quite distinct from the holy-cow preservation philosophy, especially as proponents of the latter type show little concern for non-cow species of animals, even human beings. Further, the conservation movement is nowhere near being "hijacked by animal rights".

Most of the conservationists I know are non-vegetarians, even if they do not themselves kill animals, especially wild animals. But, in any case, it is not clear why it would be disastrous for conservationists to become sensitive to animal rights. Unfortunately, after making such provocative statements, Baskaran does not give any reasons to support them.



A Day with the Shama Essays on Nature

By S. Theodore Baskaran

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A BEVY OF BLACK SWANS and a spring of teals at Lake Wollumboola near the Culburra Beach, east of Nowra in Australia, seen in August 2011.



THE LION-TAILED MACAQUE, in Valparai, Tamil Nadu.

Salim Ali was an avid hunter, so was I and many animal rights activists, mostly in their youth. By the time I got to know Salim Ali, which was in the 1980s, he had moderated his position and thought that it was all right to kill birds and animals for science, essentially to help understand them and thereby better protect them, as a species. He did not appear to oppose all animal rights, *per se*.

Interestingly, two chapters later (page 184) Baskaran tells us that the well-known conservationist M. Krishnan used to mock his friend the “hunting, shooting, fishing” conservationist E.R.C. Davidar, by saying: “Reggie wants to preserve wildlife on the walls of his drawing room.” Although Baskaran does not express his view on this, in a later chapter (page 211) he

states: “We humans, in our arrogance, seem to consider all creatures existing solely for our benefit and pleasure.” Hurrah! But we are left a little confused about how he would reconcile this with his earlier statement.

CONSERVATIONISTS

The book also seems to be biased towards biologists, while talking about conservationists. Baskaran talks in detail about, and rightly so, many distinguished biologists who have done much to conserve species and ecosystems. But the book ignores or at best mentions only in passing the many non-biologist conservationists who have contributed significantly to conservation of natural habitats and ecosystems, with the exception of a few persons like the late Samir Acharya, who fought im-

portant conservation battles in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. (Acharya died on October 18.)

Prominent by their omission are conservationists involved with various environmental causes such as the Chipko movement against deforestation, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the anti-Tehri dam protests, and movements against mining and other commercial and “development” activities causing depletion of natural resources and damage to ecosystems. These are not just environmental activists but bureaucrats (like Baskaran himself), journalists, lawyers, academics, and even film-makers. They needed a more sensitive treatment, or at least a prominent acknowledgement of their role.

Baskaran highlights, in

more than one place, the hesitation of scientists in taking up the cudgels against threats to species and habitats.

He quotes a scientist as saying that this is mainly due to the ability of the government to harm them, as their access to research funds and permission to conduct research usually vest with the government (page 170). This is equally true for other categories of protesters.

Baskaran’s observations on tourism are perceptive and well founded. Perhaps, the ultimate dilemma is how to ensure that the type and quantum of tourism is such that it does not adversely impact wildlife. It is unlikely that hardcore conservationists would evolve from among people who have never “tasted” the wonders of wilderness.

The lament about the

adoption and popularisation of “insipid” Western, mostly English and Latin, names for plants and animals is well placed (pages 217-222), especially as local names are so much more descriptive and interesting. But, in a country as linguistically diverse as India, adopting historical Tamil names for species cannot be the answer. So, is it preferable to have multiple names for the same species, separate for each language? (Imagine what a national, leave alone global, field guide of birds, animals and plants would look like.) Or should one accept a common link language, like English and Latin, however boring?

The excellence of Baskaran’s narrative is marred by poor standards of editing and proofreading. The text is riddled with editing and proof errors. I counted over 130 errors in 200 pages, and that too without consciously looking for them or being trained to find them. This is inexcusable.

Some of the typos are amusing. On page 171, the wildlife biologist Ulhas Karanth is quoted as saying: “Conservation in India began more as a preoccupation of the more *effluent* section of society...” (emphasis added).



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

THE CONSERVATIONIST
E.R.C. Davidar.



VILAY CAVALÉ

THE WHITE-RUMPED SHAMA.

There is also often an assumption that the reader must be familiar with the Tamil language or local connotations. If the original article was published only in the Chennai edition of *The Hindu*, this might have been an understandable assumption, although still somewhat far-fetched. But in a book that will certainly be read across the world, this is not acceptable. The editors should have added the necessary explanations in English.

There are references that need to be explained to the non-Tamil reader. For example Romulus Whitaker, talking about deaths from snakebites, is quoted as saying: “...about 90% die outside, having gone for other remedies like mantra, magic, stationmaster, and so on.” Initially, I thought this was another amusing typo, although I could not figure out what it was meant to be. However, I was later told that a man who was employed as station master was believed to have the power to treat snakebite. People would send a tele-

gram to him and he would come over and chant mantras to neutralise the venom. Such specific references, clearly need an explanation for the non-Tamil reader.

Each chapter mentions, at the end, the date of the essay’s original publication, mostly in *The Hindu*. However, in some cases, references are made, within the chapter, about events that happened after the date of publication (pages 55, 111, 202). These were obviously added later, before republication. As there is neither a footnote nor a general warning at the beginning of the book, this leads to confusion. Surely, the editors should have thought of this.

Another irritating editorial gaff is that there is no mention that photographs are included in the book. I realised that they were there when I turned to page 61 (and pages 89, 137 and 232). Surprisingly, there is also no reference in all but one of the chapters (page 174) to where the relevant photograph is. On

page 209, there is a note saying “photo appears elsewhere in this book”, without specifying where.

Baskaran’s excellent prose is marred by the absence of colour photographs and illustrations to go with each chapter. Pictures are an essential element of a book such as this, and their exclusion is unforgivable. With digital technology, the cost of such inclusion would have been minimal, and the value of the book would have gone up immeasurably. Baskaran is himself an accomplished nature photographer, so there could not have been a shortage of pictures.

Ironically, while talking about some other publication, Baskaran remarks how illustrations add to the narrative (pages 81-82). He also talks about the importance of designing books well (page 82), perhaps unaware that his comments would become relevant to his own book.

But despite these drawbacks, this is a thoroughly enjoyable book that has taught me much. Baskaran’s account of a species, especially of some of the bird species, reads like a biography of that individual bird, bringing it alive in a way that nothing else could. I am overawed by the manner in which he effortlessly spans so many disciplines and topics, sometimes all in the same chapter.

A wonderful collection of essays. And that makes me wonder why the publishers chose to depict Baskaran, on the back cover, with a red face. □

Shekhar Singh is an environmental researcher and activist.