

## WILD ABOUT NATURE

Though India has a rich tradition of concern for animals and plants, in the twentieth century it was mostly lost except in some rural and tribal communities and among some naturalists in urban areas. It was only in the late nineteen sixties that there was a popular resurgence of interest in, and concern for, wildlife. This resurgence was mainly due to a small band of naturalists who started writing and talking about the wonders of the natural world in a language that was understood and appreciated by the layman.

Undoubtedly, one of the pioneers is Theodore Baskaran, whose numerous

popular articles and even more numerous formal and informal talks and chats have inspired generations of young (and not so young) urban dwellers to become die-hard nature lovers. I have had, over the years, the privilege of 'bird watching' with many famous naturalists. However, a trip with Baskar (as he is popularly known) remains an unforgettable experience. It is his enthusiasm and sense of humour that make each trip memorable. His excitement at seeing a bird in the wild is infectious. After an outing when your arm has been gripped painfully each time a bird appears, or a conversation cut off abruptly, mid-sentence, you

THE DANCE OF THE SARUS: Essays of a Wandering Naturalist by S.Theodore Baskaran. (OUP), pp.240, Rs.295.00

are hooked for good. You can no longer prevent your heart from racing and your adrenaline from flowing, every time a sighting is in the offing. One trip with Baskar, and this sense of excitement, followed by a feeling of profound wonder remains with you for the rest of your life. I should know, because I am one of the happy victims.

Baskar is also one of the most talented storytellers that I have met. Like all great storytellers, he can make even common, day-to-day experiences seem full of wonder, joy and humour. This is

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### NON-FICTION

obvious in his writings on wildlife. I remember, many years back, walking into his house in Shillong, when he had just returned from his trip to Haflong and was, in his inimitable style, regaling one and all with what he saw and what he imagined of the great mystery of the Jatinga phenomenon. I remember the Pitta that he had rescued and brought back from Jatinga, hopping around the living room. However, it was only many years later, when I read his account of that episode in 'The Haflong Phenomenon' that I realised that what the Pitta was actually doing was

pumping its rump up and down, in typical Pitta fashion, as if to mock at my amateurish efforts to understand its mysterious ways.

Baskar's collection of essays (including the one quoted above) entitled *The Dance of the Sarus* is a wonderful book that brings together some of his best writings on nature. The essays exquisitely combine clarity with readability. They are informative, sometimes even 'scientific', yet they communicate the sense of wonder that must be the basis of any meaningful relationship with nature.

Most of the essays are constructed around an episode: a sighting, a trip, an

encounter or an interview. Yet, Baskar skilfully weaves around each such episode a web of information and brings it alive with images that are poignantly visual.

The glistening white bird that lands on a branch like a ballerina is an egret. All the four varieties of egrets breed here. The Median Egret sports the long plumes of its breeding mantle...

And, again:

Whenever we made our way to the stream the Dipper was there, hopping from rock to rock, bobbing, diving and frolicking, healing the many little wounds of our lives.

The collection contains 53 essays, classified into those about birds, mammals, habitats, issues and domestic

species. The section on domestic species is particularly welcome, especially since most books on animals deal either with wild species or domestic ones. Baskar's love of nature is refreshingly tinged with empathy for other living creatures. This comes out strongly in his essay entitled 'In a Well of Despair', which describes the cruelty that humans inflict on other species in the name of scientific research. It is also obvious in his gentle and almost loving treatment of the donkey in his essay 'The Donkeys

of the World'.

However, one cannot help wishing that Baskar had the time to tell us what he thinks about some of the current environmental issues. How does he think we should resolve the seeming conflict between conservation and human needs that has become a part of life in many of the national parks and sanctuaries in India? What is his position on large dams?

The book's production could have been better. The number of editing and proofing errors are unacceptable, considering the publisher is none other than the prestigious Oxford University Press.

This book is a must for all those who love nature, and even more so for all those who are yet to be introduced to its glory and mystery. As Baskar puts it:

People often ask me if birdwatching is my hobby. I tell them that it is a concern, a passion that adds new dimensions to my life and brings more zest for living. When you start birdwatching, your physical world comes alive and you begin to notice dramas that you failed to see earlier.

I can think of few pleasanter ways of learning about nature than reading these vivid descriptions of wild encounters. And it leaves many of us who write long boring tomes on wildlife wondering why we bother!

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