

Memoirs of a Mentor: Lavkumar Khachar

Pranav Trivedi, PhD : 13, Sukomal Apartments, Ramdevnagar, Ahmedabad-380015. Email: tpranav70@gmail.com

It was the winter of 1985 when as a 15-yr boy, I was standing in front of that legendary figure, who very casually told the three of us (two of my friends & me) to spend the night out in the forest alone and then see him in the morning! Before we could recover from the shock of this preposition, he spotted a flock of white birds flying at a distance and asked us a simple question: "what are those birds – flying there?" To this we replied "Cattle Egrets" in unison. As the birds approached closer, they turned out to be Little Egrets to our horror! He said with a chuckle, even the great Dr. Salim Ali used to say, "Perhaps, it could be Little Egret!" That was my first lesson in field ornithology in Dangs forests, which has remained with me till today and reduced the embarrassment that can arise on account of an impatient misidentification of bird species. Needless to say the legend was Lavkumar Khachar and I was in awe of him from day one.

On 12th February, 2015 when I met him for the last time at his residence in Rajkot, it struck me that our acquaintance was of 30 years. As I waited patiently, my eyes caught a glimpse of his article on why the Gir Lions should not be sent to Madhya Pradesh. When he finally arrived in a wheelchair, he talked conservation in a feeble yet affectionate voice. And I am sure if we met again I would have something new to learn from him. His slogan "Back to Nature" is a simple yet vital reminder for humanity to return to its roots.

Lavkumar 'Sir' – as all of us fondly called him may be considered the father of nature education movement in India. He believed that one's physical and mental fitness defines his/her relationship with Nature. Apart from reducing our burden on resources he believed a healthy and fit person can experience Nature in all its elements. He wanted each individual to go through the experience of challenging situations in Nature to help him/her transcend the subconscious fear of wilderness. Those who followed this ideology of his are till date indebted to him for this invaluable contribution to their lives. His own programme of nature education (Back to Nature), which started from exposure trips conducted for the students of Rajkumar College, Rajkot (RKC) in 1960s and later supported by WWF-India was one of its kind. It had five modules starting from Hingolghadh and moving to Little Rann of Kachchh, Pirotan island (for some time

Ajad island), Gir forest and ultimately Manali. These modules introduced the youngsters in the age group of 10 to 20 years to the wonders and vagaries of nature in all the major ecosystems of the State (i.e. desert, thorn-scrub, sea & forest) as well as to the grandest of all – the mighty Himalaya! Little wonder, they returned stronger, calmer and excited about being in Nature. Many turned into volunteers too and handled camp activities. He believed that volunteers should lead by example, being physically fit, value-driven and of sound character. All the volunteers who worked with me during 1993 to 2005 gained tremendously when he was present at the camp-site – not just by knowledge, but in terms of becoming stronger physically and mentally. This is put by him very elegantly and clearly in the 'Foreword' that he wrote for my book "Walking on the Green Path" which was a companion for volunteers who got trained with me for nature camps through a series of workshops and camps – "While it has been my experience that once a seemingly frightening exposure has been lived through, a remarkable change occurs in the child's personality... Any individual wanting to introduce others and particularly children to the joys of Nature should do so only after undergoing a very serious effort of going through a personal cleansing of the generations of fears as otherwise these will continue to be propagated. The cause of wildlife and wilderness conservation cannot be carried forward by individuals imbued by subconscious fears. The team of young people for whom this



"Mankind is no longer preoccupied with biological limits, we now are generating pressures totally outside biological needs."

book is prepared have been exposed to the “terrors of Nature” in the earlier WWF-India nature camps and as such writing this brief letter is a fulfillment of what I had been privileged to initiate in 1976 with WWF-India’s youth movement....”

I was amazed at the accuracy of his predictions about rainfall and one day asked him how he managed this. His answer with a mischievous smile was “You just need to observe clouds regularly for about 30 years!” Some of the best geography lessons I ever learnt were through his talks and discussions. His lecture on “how difficult it is for youngsters to die!” was my favourite and I made sure he gave it once to each batch in my nature education camps. Many conditioned ideas, fears and wrong notions of students were broken and dissolved in this talk.

He worked ceaselessly to safeguard and restore the natural habitats for wildlife and for future generations of India’s children. The challenging journeys afoot to Mt. Kailash and Lake Mansarovar with Gurdial Singh in 1954 and ascent to the Nandadevi basin in 1977, at a time when no Indian naturalist had attempted such adventures before spoke of his role as ambassador for wilderness protection. He wrote accounts of both these journeys in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society (JBNHS) and the Himalayan Journal respectively. The latter led to the creation of the first Himalayan National Park – the Nandadevi National Park. He also had other firsts to his credit with respect to creation of Protected Areas. His forays into the Gulf of Kachchh conducted with the support of the present Jamsaheb of Nawanager led to creation of the country’s first Marine National Park and Sanctuary. Hingolghadh and Khijadiya Sanctuaries are other examples of his tireless efforts to save Gujarat and India’s natural heritage for future generations.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, he got involved with two very important projects in Gujarat. These entailed restoration and regeneration of two village ‘wastelands’ from their degraded states for use as outdoor learning facilities. The two sites were Bakore in Panchmahals and Beyt Dwarka, an island off the coast at Okha. I was fortunate to witness the transformation of the two sites in a span of just two decades. In 2014-15; I visited both. To my utter surprise, I saw a pair of Indian Grey Hornbills, Asian Paradise-Flycatcher, Red-throated Flycatcher, Tickell’s Blue Flycatcher, Oriental Magpie Robin, dozens of Rufous Treepies and a Crested Serpent Eagle at



Bakore – all indicating a maturing forest from a wasteland in 1989! Raised water level in the well, plenty of good quality grass, and return of the native trees are indeed some of the miracles created. Even the surrounding areas that once were barren hillocks support a lush forest today. And at Beyt Dwarka, Banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*) and Babul (*Acacia nilotica*) trees – 15 to 20 ft tall stand today where there was no tree to talk of! In place of a few scattered and tattered mangrove bushes which had survived the onslaught of human denizens, a grove of lovely mangroves with Grey and Reef Herons, Ibises and other birds roosting atop and breeding. Marine life too has recolonized the inter-tidal zone around. Both are being used as fabulous camp-sites too. The two models described above are a testimony to Nature’s own power to take care of herself with some protection and nurturing. This amazing transformation is thanks to the vision and belief of Lavkumar Sir.

Just like a rainbow, Lavkumar Sir’s contribution to conservation came in many colours and shades. He played a pivotal role in halting the denotification of a major area of the Narayan Sarovar Sanctuary in Kachchh. The effort succeeded partially in that it secured 444 sq km area instead of the earlier 94 sq km (as per the first order) out of the original 765 sq km. Great people foretell things that we generally don’t imagine or consider worth paying attention to. Two of his critical predictions about the future of Sarus Crane needing attention and the spread of Gando Baval (*Prosopis juliflora*) creating havoc for conservation in the state have come true not too long after his warnings in the 1980s and 1990s respectively.



“Before human beings destroyed the forests and badly fragmented habitats the joyous upwelling chorus of birds must have preceded the Sun from East to West - in the Himalayas the first thrush to sing would be in some forested gorge of Arunachal, its call awakening the next thrush to the west and so on till these of Kashmir finally heard the call to rise and sing.”

Now, let me come to Lavkumar Sir's forte – birds and his contribution to ornithology in India. His journey into the world of Nature took off on the wings of birds from a very early age. This was in part thanks to his grooming in the erstwhile Princely State of Jasdan that was illustrious in terms of love and respect for Nature and to the atmosphere of birdwatching in the then Kathiawar region created by the erstwhile rulers of the Princely States surrounding Jasdan. In this list, he included the bird-trio of Bhavnagar – Krishnakumarsinhji, Nirmalkumarsinhji and RS Dharmakumarsinhji (he called them his Bhavnagar “Gurus”); Jamsaheb of Navanagar and his cousin DS Shivraj Kumar of Jasdan. He was also fortunate to receive tutelage and grooming from a very prestigious company of great birdwatchers and outstanding naturalists such as General Harold Williams, Horace Alexander, Dr. Salim Ali and Zafar Futehally with enviable contemporaries such as Humayun Abdul Ali.

If one glances through the early volumes of Newsletter for Birdwatchers (1960s & 1970s), virtually every issue had one or two pieces by him reporting some observation as well as highlighting important issues/thoughts. Journal of the BNHS, Himalayan (Club) Journal, 'Vihang' (a Gujarati newsletter for birds), and much later the newsletter/journal 'Indian Birds' also benefited immensely from his contributions. This is no mean feat when you consider the breadth of observations and issues that he covered through these write-ups. When the Indian Ornithological Society – a first of its kind in India was formed in 1961, KS Lavkumar (as he was known then) was the youngest member of the editorial team at the age of 30 along with DS Shivraj Kumar of Jasdan and Dr. R. M. Naik – an ornithologist who groomed many young ornithologists in Gujarat later. At a young age of 40, he co-authored with RS Dharmakumarsinhji a book entitled 'Sixty Indian Birds', which was brought out by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India. Among the many accolades that he received included the Salim Ali - Lok Wan Tho Lifetime Award for Excellence in Ornithology for his pioneering work in ornithology, Certificate of Merit awarded by His Royal Highness Prince Philip for his contribution in initiating the Youth Education Movement and developing the Nature Camps for WWF-India, Venu Menon Lifetime award in 2004 and Delhi Bird Lifetime Achievement Award.

As rightly put by Bikram Grewal in an obituary in Live Mint - “It was with his passing away on the 2 March, 2015 in Rajkot that I realized that it marked the end of an era; that a glorious

chapter of Indian ornithology had come to an end. The greats had all gone.” Here, I am tempted to quote two excerpts representative of the flavour and content of his earliest writings showing how his in-depth knowledge of geography and birds along with his vision of conservation (see the Bustard piece) and a flair for the language combined to make these some of the best nature writings that exist in India.

Some birds around Badrinath (1 & 2)

“During my visit in early June, the birds were busy rearing their broods, and one pair had taken residence right inside the temple courtyard under the beams of a corridor which was used for sermons in the day and Kirtans at night, and was brightly lit by gas lamps. The birds went about their household chores of rearing a hungry family over the heads of hundreds of devotees, perching at times not more than a foot above single heads before flying up into its nest. It was a wonderful example of how a bird of the wildest rivers trustingly accepts man where the latter's destructive propensities are subdued temporarily by needs of the spirit.....The birds along the water at Badrinath are restricted in species on account of their inflexible ecology, and the rather specialised method of feeding required, but the birds are an unfailingly attractive group to watch. They are also of interest, as they are typically Himalayan, and above all there is something irresistible in the way they lead their lives along the dangerous rivers and among the perpetual roar and thunder of the waters cascading down those breathtaking gorges....From Badrinath, the valley becomes a broad U-shaped valley that suggests a time in the remote geological past, when it contained a gigantic glacier which has receded to leave the remnants that today form the Sathopant glacier at the head of the valley from which a glacial river flows out as the Alaknanda. These old glacial valleys have very broad, flat floors gently grading into greater heights, but the sides steeply rise upwards often in sheer cliff faces polished to a smoothness which only the giant and icy chisels of a glacier can do...If the birdwatcher is lucky, he might well see the flitting form of a Wall Creeper which is about the size of a large sparrow, with round full wings of a Hoopoe and the same uncertain flight of a butterfly. The general coloration is dark grey with crimson linings in the wings; the beak is long and curved, but it is the habit of alighting and running up sheer walls that is diagnostic of the Wall Creeper and it lives its perpendicular life on cliff faces above 14,000 ft. in the Himalayas, descending to the foothills in the winter, where birds have been recorded on the sandstone faces of Imperial



“Life can survive in the slime, it cannot scintillate just as water exists in a pool but only sparkles when hurled against boulders to throw up drops of spray or churned into waves and eddies.”

buildings.... For a Chough is a bird of the unfettered Himalayan elements, for ever circling and tossing, rising and falling, and as free as the winds that breather across these magnificent mountains. Like Wordsworth I often lie on my couch in a pensive mood and there is sudden joy as the Choughs come circling across that 'inner eye which is the bliss of solitude.'" – K. S. Lavkumar (Newsletter for Birdwatchers Vol. 1: No. 9)

THE Great Indian Bustard

"...The best method to safeguard the Great Indian Bustard is to Include it on the list of the "farmers' friends". Specially in Rajasthan, where locust-fighting is a major project, the introduction of the bird to farmers and herdsmen should be made so as to make them aware of the value of the bird as a destroyer of locusts and other such pests. An effort in this way to elicit positively their help in protecting the bustard would go further than all the legislation banning its shooting. Once the villagers realize the bird is of value to their economy, they will no doubt extend it protection from poachers in the same way as sentiment has safe-guarded so large and possibly such a good eating, bird like the Sarus Crane and the peafowl. I am certain that it is mainly indiscriminate killing which has sadly reduced the numbers of the Great Indian Bustard, the spread of agriculture is not the main cause, as they could no doubt range across cultivated land for their omnivorous fare. During the rains when they breed, there is sufficient shelter for them in the crops. Bustards wherever they are not harried by man, are remarkably tolerant of his proximity. There is little purpose served by establishing sanctuaries without proper staff to protect the inmates..." - K. S. Lavkumar (Newsletter for Birdwatchers, Vol. 3)

In 1996 he wrote an excellent review on the "Birds of Gujarat" in the Salim Ali centenary year, which was almost fifty years after Dr. Salim Ali's classic account of Birds of Gujarat in the Journal of the BNHS. This is the last comprehensive review available to us on birds of the entire state.

His interest in plants was only next to that in birds and knowing the intimate relationship between the two taxa, he had his own ways to 'create' bird-conducive habitats everywhere – be it a degraded forest, institutional campus or an urban garden. He has been involved

in getting thousands of trees, ornamental plants and climbers suitable for birds planted and nurtured in many parts of the country. This would easily exceed the efforts of any individuals that we know of and it may include professionals such as landscape designers and architects too. He was sensitive to the appropriateness of planting indigenous ones in countryside/natural/degraded habitats, while going for a mix of key native species and aesthetic exotics in the gardens. He personally gave seeds of such trees to us, like a few wild *Erythrina suberosa* (Coral Tree) seeds which he once gave me. I planted a few and one of those grew into a tall tree of 35-40 ft within no time bearing flowers in spring that doubled our joy. He was responsible for convincing the concerned to plant a huge number of native fig trees (Banyan, Peepal, Gular/Umro, Pipar) at the Moti Khavdi refinery complex of the Reliance Industries. His student and very close aid Girish Adesara has developed this art and science further and continues to spread his philosophy and approach to the landscapes he creates. Many private farms of his students and campuses of various places including Sundarvan... stand a testimony to his interest, vision and efforts in creating rich habitats for birds and other beasts. Of course the birds have responded by nesting, roosting and feeding in such habitats.

Seldom one comes across someone who completes the whole



pilgrimage of both receiving and giving back to nature in one lifetime. I'll put Lavkumar Khachar's name among these, along with the likes of Dr. Salim Ali, Zafar Futehally, Humayun



"Mankind has down the ages sought to shield itself against perceived discomforts. The story of civilisation perhaps is the story of human beings attempting to avoid the onward driving forces and legitimising fears."

Memoirs of a Mentor...

Abdulali and Dr. AJT Johnsingh in India. I believe it was he alone who took himself to greater heights as he devoted his time and energies to cultivating within him a vision of introducing young people to nature just as he was fortunate to experience.

When I was asked to make a presentation on my personal journey in nature in the Annual Meeting of Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) in 2013, it dawned upon me how important Lavkumar Sir was as a mentor in my life and shared it with colleagues and invitees. To our collective surprise, each of my colleagues at NCF also had a similar mentor in their respective childhood and youth, who had motivated and nurtured them. A corner of my heart is permanently reserved for this revered teacher, where his sentence "Take care of yourself...you owe it to the world and yourself" is etched forever. The only true tribute that a student can offer his

teacher is to follow what he said and I'm glad I've been made an instrument in taking children "Back to Nature"...

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