

OBITUARY

RAOL SHREE DHARMAKUMARSINHJI

(1917-1986)

(With a photograph)

It might seem that sitting down to write an obituary for a person one has known for over four decades should be easy. It is not, because when it comes to sitting down and writing on the person one has known for so long, learned to respect and to love, one finds to ones dismay that one really did not know the departed individual as well as one might have been taken for granted as for instance we all individually and collectively have indeed, been taking everything of value on this Earth and only realising the terrible loss when there are short supplies and unavailability. This is what dawns on us as we start writing about Dharmakumarsinhji, or Uncle Bapa. His death has removed from our lives a great friend and a truly great naturalist. As we look back over the receding memory trail, Uncle Bapa stands out clearly and all the wonderful experiences shared with him are etched in sharp clarity. As young boys, his visits to Hingolghadh every monsoon were eagerly anticipated by us. Each winter a return visit to Bhavnagar and the sea coast was impatiently awaited and these were always too short and quickly over, for those were the times of strict protocol and guests could not stay longer than a certain period howsoever welcome they might be! While we indeed were fledgling ornithologists in our own right even in those early days it was Dharmakumarsinhji who guided us into the complexities of identifying waders during those

sunny days at Hathab and the Bhavnagar Salt pans. It was he who fired our enthusiasm for exploring the islands of the Gulf of Kutch. It was he who encouraged and paid for a photographic trip by Lavkumar to Karwar after the Whitebellied Sea Eagles. But we anticipate.

Earlier, while we were still in the box camera stage, he presented us a SLR with telephoto lens and a fortress like hide made of teak! We owe a great gratitude to Dharmakumarsinhji for his encouragement and guidance in a venture which we were among the first Indians to take up and had we been able to spend more time after our photographic interests, we might well have become leaders in the field! Even so Shivraj Kumar won the Loke Wan Tho Prize in the BNHS Centenary photographic competition. A good many of the photographs in SIXTY INDIAN BIRDS jointly authored by Dharmakumarsinhji and Lavkumar were taken by us under very primitive conditions and with quite inadequate photographic equipment.

For us, his death has been a very personal loss and we now know that his characteristic slow speech and loud, hearty laughter will never more be heard in Hingolghadh which he loved. We no longer can expect a card or a scribbled note congratulating us on some action, or providing some wry comment on happenings in the world. But more so, his death starkly highlights the terrible decline of

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all forms of wildlife which he loved and to protect which he spent a large part of his energies. We have been privileged to have seen for a short time the magnificent wildlife heritage of Gujarat, a heritage which, when he was born into the Bhavnagar princely family 70 years ago, people took for granted as indeed they did the trees, waters, and the clear air around them. That he should have grown into a sportsman is not surprising since in his day it was the thing done to go on shoots, it was the day of the field naturalist and the shikari, and prowesses were gauged by the number of duck you shot out of the winter skies, yet, it is to his credit that at that early time he had the making of a naturalist and a conservationist. He studied the birds, and all forms of animal life around him. What he did not know about them was not much worth knowing! He could speak with equal confidence on the identity of a snake or a frog as he would his beloved raptors! His knowledge of falconry was legendary and only surpassed perhaps by his elder brother the highly respected Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji. He had a keen eye and even in later years, sitting relaxed on the terrace at Hingolgadh he would spot a chinkara at the far end of the sanctuary, or point to an eagle high overhead which to us would be a mere speck.

If he was an excellent shot, he also anticipated modern birdbanding in India and with the Maharaja of Dholpur, was the first Indian to start ringing birds. Dharmakumarsinhji's work with the Lesser Florican is reported in the Journal. Infact, the Lesser Florican and the Great Indian Bustard were an infatuation with him and his contribution in highlighting the plight of these magnificent species must be recorded with due humility. It was indeed, a fitting tribute that the Rajasthan Government

recognised for his work on the Great Indian Bustard by awarding him a "Tamra Patra" (Copper inscription) in the evening of his life. That Dharmakumarsinhji's impact on the natural history scene is not as sharp as it might be is because he, unfortunately was not a trained scientist and perhaps that he, born a Prince, saw no compunctions to record and



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weigh and measure all — regretfully for us all, he took his expertise and his great knowledge for granted or perhaps being born and brought up as a sporting Prince, like the lion which he did much to preserve, he was a trifle too relaxed and so opportunities sped past and time seldom gives a second chance. This sadly, is the story of conservation action in our country, and today, if much indeed has been done, not enough is being done and those who are younger and still have the time, must make this an occasion to put in much more concern and effort to save the tattered remnants of Dharmakumarsinhji's world.

Dharmakumarsinhji wrote several notes and articles in the Society's Journal and in various magazines, he is the author of *THE BIRDS OF SAURASHTRA* a massive volume which now has become a collector's item. His has to his credit a large number of excellent photographs and his films are valuable documentaries which need to be preserved for all times as valuable records of what was, and what might be if we all bestir ourselves a little more. He was an artist of considerable merit and his pastel of Great Indian Bustards hangs in a room where he used to stay whenever he visited Hingolghadh. His pastels have received awards and a few of them hang in homes of important people. Dharmakumarsinhji also had talent for music and played the sitar for privileged friends. Few know that he was an aviculturist of repute and that in his aviaries at Bhavnagar he had bred the Lesser Bird of Paradise for the first time in captivity and received the Aviculture Society of Britain's prestigious award for this achievement. At his death, he was the President of the Pheasant Trust UK, and the President of the Taraporewalla Aquarium, Bombay. To add to his many talents, he was a hockey coach of high standard and his death will be mourned by athletes along

with naturalists! The Maharashtra Athletics Association will mourn a past President.

Recognising early in life that the birds and animals he loved and hunted were in danger of extinction, he actively involved himself in promoting conservation concepts and was among the pioneers who helped to frame India's wildlife laws, and from the very beginning till his death, he was on the Indian Board For Wildlife, and on the Wildlife Advisory Boards of Gujarat and Rajasthan. In 1950 he had been asked by the Government of India to survey Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra for suitable wildlife areas. As Vice Chairman of the Indian Board for Wildlife his demise terminates a tenure of 25 years. The Society has lost an old friend and one of its oldest members. Now that he is no longer with us, we shall miss his puckish humour, his outlandish comments like "Girnar is wearing a Bikini" and his loud slow drawl. We all took Dharmakumarsinhji for granted as indeed he took his unique opportunities and it is only the finality of death which has brought home to us what a heavy loss the conservation movement in the country has suffered. But, as long as the Great Indian Bustard roams our wide open spaces, the Lesser Florican bounces up against the monsoon gales over Saurashtra grasslands, skies of Demoiselle Cranes flight across the pale blue winter skies of Gujarat and the swift Laggar nests on the Hingolghadh balcony, Dharmakumarsinhji's spirit will live on in the hearts of the growing numbers of young naturalists. Yes, while he could have done much more, what ever he has achieved is a great deal and we salute the memory of a sporting Prince and one of India's pioneer conservationists.

SHIVRAJKUMAR KHACHAR
LAVKUMAR KHACHER

R. S. Dharmakumarsinhji's

Publications in the Society's *Journal* between the years 1935 to 1985

The occurrence of the Scaup (*Nyroca m. marila*) in Bhavnagar State, xxxviii, 195; Breeding of the Indian Barn Owl [*Tyto alba javanica* (Gmelin)] in Bhavnagar, xli, 174; The Indian Great Horned Owl [*Bubo bubo bengalensis* (Frankl.)], xli, 174; The Indian Crested Serpent Eagle [*Spilornis cheela cheela* (Lath.)], xli, 177; Jungle and House Crows as destroyers of Game, xlii, 185; Frog eating a Snake, xlii, 200; Injury to a Crocodile (1 photo), xlii, 445; Banding of the Lesser Florican (*Sypheotides indica*) in Bhavnagar State 44: 299; Musk-Shrew (*Suncus caeruleus*) attacking Bull-Frog (*Rana tigrina*) 46: 180; Breeding of the Blue-cheeked Bee-eater (*Merops superciliosus persicus* Pallas) in Bhavnagar State 46: 723; Breeding of Palm Swift [*Tachornis batasiensis palmarum* (Gray)] and Coot (*Fulica atra atra* Linn.) in Bhavnagar 46: 724; The Kentish Plover (*Leucopoliis alexandrinus* Linn.) breeding in Kathiawar 46: 726; Mating and the parental instinct of the Marsh Crocodile (*C. palustris* Lesson) 47: 174; The Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus cristatus* Linn.) in Bhavnagar State 47: 385; The late stay of migratory birds in Bhavnagar, Kathiawar 47: 387; Some interesting birds of the Gir and Girnar, Kathiawar 48: 187; 'Aggressive demonstration by Russell's Viper' 48: 595; Kentish Plover [*Leucopolis alexandrinus* (Linn.)], breeding on west coast of Saurashtra 48: 809; The Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indica* (Miller): Its Courtship display, behaviour, and habits. (With a plate, 2 text-figures and 2 tables) 49: 201; The Gir Forest and its Lions. Part II (With a plate) 49: 456 (With Wynter-Blyth, M.A.); The Gir Forest and its Lions. Part III 49: 685 (With Wynter-Blyth, M.A.); Occurrence of Hodgson's Pipit (*Anthus roseatus*) in Saurashtra 50: 175; Blacknecked Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis* Brehm) in Bhavnagar 50: 664; Large stone in stomach of Crocodile 50: 950; The Great Indian Bustard 51: 740; Movements of Lesser Florican [*Sypheotides indica* (Miller)] 51: 938; A new Sand Lark

from Western India (Saurashtra) 52: 8 (With Vaurie, C.); Goshawk (*Astur gentilis*) in Bhavnagar (Saurashtra) 52: 211; Wild Life Preservation in India. Annual report for 1953 on the Western Region 52: 865; The Whitebellied Sea Eagles of Karwar [*Haliaeetus leucogaster* (Gmelin)] 53: 569 (With Lavkumar, K. S.); Besra Sparrow-hawk (*Accipiter virgatus*) in Saurashtra 53: 699; Rednecked Phalarope (*Lobipes lobatus* Linn.) in Bhavnagar, Bombay State 54: 465 (With Shivraj Kumar of Jasdan); Bluetailed Bee-eater *Merops philippinus* Linnaeus in Western Saurashtra 55: 351; Sandwich Tern [*Thalasseus sandvicensis sandvicensis* (Latham)] 55: 357; Large Clutch of Nakta eggs 56: 634; Indian Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa cristatus* Wagner) feeding on *Boerhavia diffusa* Linn. 57: 654; On the eggs of the Great Indian Bustard [*Choriotis nigriceps* (Vigors)] 57: 663; Marsh sandpipers (*Tringa stagnatalis*) colliding against telephone wires 57: 666; Occurrence of the Shelduck [*Tadorna tadorna* (Linn.)] in Bhavnagar, Gujarat State 58: 275; Communal distraction display in Large Grey Babbler [*Turdoides malcolmi* (Sykes)] 58: 512; Rufousbellied Hawk-Eagle, *Lophotriorchis k. kienerii* (E. Geoffroy) in North Kanara 58: 514; The Great Indian Bustard [*Choriotis nigriceps* (Vigors)] at the nest 59: 173; The Forest Wagtail *Motacilla indica* Gmelin in the Gir Forest, Saurashtra 60: 261; Occurrence of the House Martin *Delichon urbica* (Linn.) in Saurashtra, Gujarat 65: 221; Extension of breeding range and other notes on Blackshafted Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons saundersi* Hume) 69: 420; The Crested Bunting, *Melophus lathamii* (Gray) in Bhavnagar (Saurashtra) Gujarat 69: 655; Occurrence of Redthroated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* (Pallas) in Bhavnagar 72: 557; Ortolan bunting (*Emberiza hortulana* Linn.) in Kutch, Gujarat 74: 179; Spotbill Duck (*Anas p. poecilorhyncha*) Forster nesting in a tree 74: 354; Blackthroated Weaver bird (*Ploceus benghalensis* (Linnaeus) breeding near Bhavnagar (Saurashtra) 74: 357; The changing wildlife of Kathiawar 75: 632; Some notes on the Indian Reef Heron 81: 188; The Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis* Temm. and Lang at Sawai Madhopur (Rajasthan) 82: 655; Longtailed Minivet record in Saurashtra 82: 657.



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