

# Reflecting on the Relationship Between Human Beings and Sparrows

Jyoti Trehan Sharma<sup>1\*</sup> and Harsh Bala Sharma<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political Science, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi

<sup>2</sup>Department of Hindi, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi

**Abstract:** The Birdman of India, Salim Moizuddin Abdul Ali, was one of the first Indians to conduct a systematic and patterned survey of birds in India. W.S. Millard, the Secretary of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) had introduced Salim Ali to the beautiful world of the birds. Millard had identified an unusually coloured sparrow that was actually shot by a young Salim Ali with his air gun. This was a yellow-throated sparrow. Following this, Millard showed Salim Ali the Society's collection of stuffed birds, and this became the beginning of a marvelous journey of exploring the bird kingdom and establishing great landmarks by Salim Ali. The sparrow had transformed Salim Ali's world. Undoubtedly, his autobiography was later titled 'The Fall of a Sparrow'. Salim Ali has very carefully noted in his autobiography as to how this yellow-throated sparrow became the turning point in his life that led him into the fascinating world of ornithology. This research contribution is not about the birdman but the bird, which is rapidly vanishing from our vicinity. The reasons for the decline of the sparrow are varied but the fact of the matter is that the natural world around us is rapidly receding. And the decline of the sparrow is an alarm, a warning against the degrading ecosystems, and an alarm against blind-folded urbanisation which is leading to human-induced disasters.

**Keywords:** disaster, ecology, sparrow, urbanisation.

## 1. Introduction

Many of us would agree that our childhood days had been fascinated by interesting bedtime stories. Of the many characters that were a source of amusement, it is not very difficult to recall and remember the special role that the sparrow had in all those tales, especially along with the crow. The fictitious sparrow that induced sleep at night

and navigated our dreams to an altogether different world, woke many of us with its non-stop chirping, along with its fellow birds. A large variety of birds in those days were all around, on the roof, on electricity poles and wires, on the kitchen window, and even in the rooms and on the fans when they were turned off. Birds were a part of our world and an entire generation grew up with them. It is therefore no wonder that sparrows get many of us nostalgic. When we watched *Ek Chidiya Anek Chidiya* (one bird many birds) - a popular animation film in the 1980s which depicted the metaphorical story and showcases the power of unity - on Doordarshan (the National Channel in India), we loved to relate to those birds as sparrows. So common and so sociable, the chirpy sparrows were part of our childhood in Delhi (India). As the childhood innocence gave way to focus and concentration on careers and professionalism, we perhaps forgot the sparrows and many other sounds of Nature that had amused and delighted us. Everything is the same, the windows, the poles, the cable wires. But the chirpy visitors are not as visible these days, as they were in the last two decades of the 20th century. What then has changed? Is it the sparrow, or is it us and our busy urban lifestyle, or is it all of this? Has something been destroyed, damaged or diminished into oblivion? It is now of common acceptance that human civilisation has entered the age of the Anthropocene - The Age of Humans, where every human activity is changing the face of Planet Earth. The changes that human beings are bringing about have actually altered our world to a great extent and is now threatening the survival of other species found on the Planet through causing mass extinction events (Wake and Vredenburg, 2008).

## 2. Sparrows in Culture and Folk

The tiny little sparrow is a very familiar bird widespread throughout Europe, Africa, Asia and even North and South America and Australia. Globally, its number is

---

Email for correspondence: dr\_jyotisharma29@yahoo.co.in

alarmingly declining, making it hard to find except in some public places where people feed them. Researchers and bird lovers are sincerely making efforts to observe the current scenario, and it is now almost a surprise to state that these little birds have consistently been a part of the growth of human civilisation - through myth and reality. In Greek mythology, the sparrow is seen as a sacred bird to Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love. Sparrows are indeed often regarded as the most lustful and sexually active birds. In Troy, it is believed that 9 sparrows were eaten by a snake and this foretold 9 years of war (Stone, 2016). In European folklore, a sparrow flying into the home is seen as a sign of impending death. According to ancient Egyptians, sparrows would catch the souls of the recently deceased and carry them to heaven. The sailors would often get a sparrow tattoo in the hope that one would catch their soul if they died at sea. In Indonesian superstition, a sparrow flying into a home denotes good luck (especially if they build a nest). It can also mean a wedding will happen soon, and if a lady sees one on Valentine's Day, it is believed that she will find happiness. The call of the sparrow is considered to bring rain in some cultures. Sparrows have been represented in literature throughout history, from the ancient Greek and Roman poets, to numerous religious texts, and later by Chaucer and Shakespeare. In the Bible, they are exhibited as offerings given by the poor, and represent the concern of God for even the smallest and most insignificant life forms. In other texts the sparrow has been used to represent the presence of God and His love for everything.

### 2.1 Sparrows in Indian Folk and Literature

In India, sparrows have had a unique representation and there is an amazing anecdote to narrate. This tiny little bird is called the Brahmin *Chiraiya* in Chhattisgarh as it abandons its chicks if someone touches them. The author Premchand wrote a beautiful children's story on this, which is available in Hindi. In almost all parts of India, it is believed that the sparrow seems to be so strict in its life that if one member is touched by a human being, then that member would be killed by the other members of its clan, through continuous poking with their beaks. In another folk narration, sparrow brings the message for the humans to take bath twice and eat once in a day, but is wrongly understood as to take bath once and eat twice a day. As a result of her miscommunication, it is believed that she has invisible irons in its legs and has to walk *champa* (on both feet, with a blistering foot). It is also narrated in the episode, that for the cause of atonement, she has to take a bath frequently and has to be engaged in food collection every time. The sparrow is also very fond of bathing in dust, which inspired the poet Ghagh Bhaddari to pen the following couplet:

कलसा पानी गरम है, चिड़िया नहावै धूर।  
चींटी ले अंडा चढ़ै, तो बरखा भरपूर।

(When the sparrow bathes in the dust, it indicates the onset of heavy rainfall. When the ant lays the eggs, it also indicates heavy rain.)

The poet Suryakant Tripathi Nirala composed a poem reflecting on the changes that occur in human life and has used the symbol of sparrow to showcase this. He writes, *ab nahi aati pulin par priytama* (Now my beloved bird does not come to the tree). Vidyanivas Mishra has referred to the sparrow as *aangan ka panchhi* (bird of the courtyard), while another poet Harivansh Rai Bachchan writes *needh ka nirman phir* (construction of the home again) highlighting the consistent efforts made by the sparrows in making their nests (Shukla, 1948). The author Mahadevi Verma has written a story titled *Gauraiya*. It has already been mentioned how Salim Ali titled his autobiography as *Ek Gauraiya Ka Girna* (The Fall of a Sparrow) (Ali, 1985). All these examples give us an insight about the love and affection that the sparrow has had in the hearts and minds of the poets in India. The sparrow finds proper placing in literary pieces with a lot of empathy and warmth. Another creative space in India is that of films, and even the Indian Film Industry (popularly referred to as Bollywood) has amply used the reference of sparrows (and other birds) in songs and dialogues so as to better connect with the audience (Modi and Saini, 2017).

### 2.2 Understanding Biological World of Sparrows

Let us now try to understand the biological world of the sparrow. The most common sparrow species is the House Sparrow or *Passer domesticus*. It measures 14-15 cm in length and is a sociable bird and favours areas of human habitation for nesting and roosting, often living in large flocks on rooftops in cities and in agricultural areas. The adult male has a grey crown, cheeks, and rump. The nape, sides of the crown, back, and wings are chestnut brown, and the under parts are pale grey. It has a black throat and breast, dark bill, and reddish legs. In winter the chestnut colour is less intense and the bill is paler. The adult female has mainly brown upperparts, including the crown, and the back is streaked with buff. The under parts are pale grey, and it has a pale stripe behind the eye. Juvenile birds are similar to adult females except the plumage pattern is less distinct. The house sparrow prefers man-made nesting sites such as holes in walls and roof spaces. In the absence of a suitable wall or roof, it will make a large, untidy nest in a bush. They eat seeds and small insects (EOL, n.d.). This species has declined as much as 50%

over the last few decades, although there are still several million pairs breeding in Britain and Ireland. Its predators include domestic cats, hawks, owls, and many other predatory birds and mammals. Due to its numbers, ubiquity, and association with human settlements, the house sparrow is culturally prominent. It has also often been kept as a pet, as well as being a food item and a symbol of lust, sexual potency, commonness, and vulgarity. Although it is widespread and abundant, its numbers have declined in some areas. The rural counterpart of the House Sparrow is the Tree Sparrow or *Passer montanus*. In addition to some morphological differences, the tree sparrow utters the same familiar chirping of the house sparrow, but it also has a sharp tik-tik in flight (EOL, n.d.). The tree sparrow has suffered a catastrophic decline over recent decades, and its numbers have reduced by more than 90%. This is most likely due to changes to farming practices, notably the autumn planting of cereal crops and the subsequent lack of winter stubble fields. Also the increasing use of efficient herbicides means the absence of "weed seeds" in many areas.

### 3. Sparrows and Us

Perhaps, we are now compelled to think. In our ecological chain, we have worked to raise considerable awareness on the issue of the tiger, and we are consistently making efforts to save them. This takes us to our next level of understanding – in our urban ecological system, sparrows are as vital as the tigers. What a sparrow is to the city, a tiger is to the forest. This is what the Chinese Communist Dictator Mao Zedong found, who is also remembered in history as a sparrow mass murderer. Mao Zedong, in 1958, ordered that all sparrows should be killed, paving the way for another environmental disaster in sequence to those that humans had already done (Blazeski, 2016). This order was part of the Four Pests Campaign (that included sparrows, rats, flies and mosquitoes), launched by the Chinese Communist Party that was nothing beyond sheer fanaticism that had stemmed from the Great Leap Forward, a massive social and economic campaign that, among many other things, turned farming into a collective, state-sponsored activity. Individual and private farming was banned as part of China's transformation into a communist system. This act of Zedong aimed at collectivizing agriculture with the intention to protect the farms. Sparrows, he was told, ate a lot of grain seeds. During this campaign, people chased the birds until they were so tired that they fell out of the sky (Luard, 2004). Around 1.96 billion sparrows had been killed all over China, in regions of Sichuan Province, Beijing and Shanghai. Though sparrows were killed to save the crops but the killing resulted in the increase of locust population

and villages had to face famine. This mass-murder of sparrows was the beginning of starvation in human history, especially for a nation that was brimming with population explosion. The population ran out of food to eat, and millions starved. Chinese journalist Yang Jisheng, who chronicled the famine in his book "Tombstone," estimates the deaths at 36 million people (Jisheng, 2012). Though Mao reversed his order in 1960 following reports by experts, but the damage had already been done, causing a domino-effect of destruction.

Non-availability of food can make anyone become violent, even the people, who only look for self-preservation in times of calamities. No element of goodness or compassion works at this time. The above discussed scenario did not go down quickly or easily. Reports claimed that it led to several thousand cases where people ate other people. To quote Jisheng (Jisheng, 2012), "Parents ate their own kids and kids ate their own parents." The behavior was so awful - with thousands of people murdered for food or for speaking out against the Chinese Government - that the topic of what has become known as the Great Famine remains taboo in China even till today. Perhaps the most tragic aspect is that most of those deaths were unnecessary. Although the fields were empty, massive grain warehouses held enough food to feed the entire country - but the Chinese Government of the day never released it. China has continuously played down the causes and effects of the Great Famine, which is officially known as the "Three Years of Difficult Period" or "Three Years of Natural Disasters."

The above case study makes us realize how paralyzing human thinking and decisions can be. Focusing on India, these tiny little sparrow birds have fortunately not been at any gun point in India. But then why are they vanishing? According to Dilawar, the house sparrow is edging towards extinction due to the lack of an emotional connect (The Hindu, 2017). Mindless urbanisation has led to loss of the natural habitat of the sparrows. March 20 is now observed as World Sparrow Day and greater awareness is needed of this day in the masses. The sparrow was also declared as the State Bird of Delhi in 2012 by the Government of NCT of Delhi. Yet, there is no comprehensive study to tell us where and how the sparrow habitats are disappearing. Our modern urban living spared no space for the bird that has always been part of our household. Majority of our homes have glass panels for windows but no ventilators where the sparrows once nested. Trees and hedges in our yards have been axed and green swathes have been paved for parking cars. There are potted plants in balconies but the loss of manure patches has deprived the birds of worms vital for feeding their

young ones. It is worse in the suburbs where huge gated communities have come up on flattened brown fields. Many have grown manicured lawns, trimmed shrubs and creepers but hardly any trees. For the majority of children here, a sparrow is only a pretty picture in their books. Most of the metropolitan cities have over-lit cityscape that has a blinding impact on these creatures. The electromagnetic radiation from mobile towers is said to be another source of hostility to the sparrows. Like many other cities, Delhi is no exception to this self-disastrous growth. Huge amounts of public money are spent on installing extra bright high-mast lights in public parks and gardens. One can easily here birds chirping in the middle of the night around these lights. According to Fatal Light Awareness Programme, most of the skyscrapers are like death traps for the birds (FLAP, n.d.). Many die each year by hitting themselves against these sky rise buildings mistaking their reflective windows for open sky. Insect decline is offered as the reason for the biggest bird mystery of modern times by a group of four scientists from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), De Montfort University in Leicester and Natural England, the Government's wildlife agency (McCarthy, 2008). Their theory, put forward in a scientific paper written for an issue of the journal *Animal Conservation*, is based on intensive research in Leicester, showing that sparrow chicks were starving in their nests because their parents could not find enough insects to feed them. So many chicks were dying and the birds' population level as a whole was declining. According to another theory, the increase in pigeon population due to their feeding in a city like Delhi, has also given considerable competition to the sparrows, who are struggling to survive.

The urban dwelling is turning out to be a nuance not only for the human beings but for all flora and fauna. Noise or sound pollution is another major killer. A study by University of Sheffield, UK, found that the city noise stops adult birds from hearing the hunger calls of their dependent offspring (Kinver, 2012). According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), bats avoid hunting in areas with road noise; female frogs cannot hear male frogs' signals in such areas; and urban noise can interfere with the songs birds use to repel intruders. It is not just the sparrows. Living in Delhi (India), the city may boast of a river, but just one glance is enough to prove that the polluted River Yamuna wetlands are in no position to support any life form. In a bid to conserve the amphibians, the University Grants Commission in India has informed universities and colleges to stop dissection of frogs in science labs. The fact of the matter is that all these changes are altering our basic food chain and making our

ecosystems chaotic. We are becoming indifferent to vanishing birds, insects or frogs, and this is more than an aesthetic or cultural lapse that makes our cities increasingly unlivable. Whatever is killing them now may well get us tomorrow.

#### 4. Conclusion

We all live our lives under very ironical circumstances. If we may recall the story of Siddharth and Devdutt, then it becomes extremely clear that the one who saves is destined to become Gautam Budhha with his sublime thoughts. Gautam Budhha talked about pain and its implications, and therefore worked towards that end, throughout his life for the sake of *Moksha* or salvation. Every life is precious and the saviour is always considered to be greater than the destroyer. But in the food chain, for the sake of survival, the animal kingdom has different unacceptable processes that are beyond the gamut of logic. The human world can swing between options, but the world of other species is incapacitated to move beyond its circumference. Sometimes, for the sake of conservation, it can be said, with a slight difference in opinion that the killer does better work to save. Salim Ali wrote in his autobiography, "When a female was sitting on the eggs, a male sparrow was sitting on the nail near the hole. I hit that male from behind the stables in the stable, in the next seven days I killed eight male sparrows in that place." He commented further, "I'm proud of this note. Logics can always vary and they do. However, we need to understand the purpose of the act. Is it for the sake of preservation or for the sake of luxury? Are human acts for conservation of Nature or for mere preservation of the self? The vanishing sparrows may be creating an ache in our hearts, but can a city afford to have innumerable pigeons that are fed by a vast number of the population, and thereby converting them into non-labouring creatures. Where is the fulcrum of balance? As the Indian system believes in अष्टादश पुराणेषु व्यासस्य वचनद्वयम् | परोपकारः पुण्याय पापाय परपीडनम् || (Vyas says in *Ashtadash Puran* that *charity is virtue and misery is sin*). But are we really following it at this stage. It is just one among the many thoughts to ponder upon before we begin to strengthen work for the conservation of the sparrows.

#### 5. References

- Ali, S. 1985. *Fall of a Sparrow*. Oxford University Press.
- Blazeski, G. 2016. In 1958 Mao Zedong ordered all the sparrows to be killed because they ate too much grain. Accessed from <https://www.thevintagenews.com> on 05/05/2017.
- EoL, n.d. *Passer domesticus*. Accessed from <http://eol.org/pages/922241/details> on 05/05/2017.

- FLAP, n.d. Fatal Lights Awareness Programme. Accessed from <http://www.flap.org/> on 05/05/2017.
- Jisheng, Y. 2012. *Tombstone: the Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962*. Macmillan.
- Kinver, M. 2012. Urban Noise 'killing baby house sparrows'. Accessed from <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-18784607> on 05/05/2017.
- Luard, T. 2004. China follows Mao with mass cull. Accessed from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3371659.stm> on 05/05/2017.
- McCarthy, M. 2008. Mystery of the Vanishing Sparrow. Accessed from <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/mystery-of-the-vanishing-sparrow-1026319.html> on 05/05/2017.
- Modi R., and Saini, R. 2017. Exploring 100 Years of Bollywood's Infatuation with Birds. *Journal of Innovation for Inclusive Development*. 2 (1): 48-49.
- Shukla, R. 1948. *Hindi Sahitya Ka Itihas*. Accessed from <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.346282> on 05/05/2017.
- Stone, J. 2016. The Meaning of Sparrows: Identification and Folklore. Accessed from <https://owlcation.com/social-sciences/The-Meaning-of-Sparrows-Identification-and-Folklore> on 10/05/2017.
- The Hindu. 2017. Sparrows nearing extinction due to lack of emotional connect: conservationist. Accessed from <http://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/sparrows-nearing-extinction-due-to-lack-of-emotional-connect-conservationist/article17531857.ece> on 05/05/2017.
- Wake, D. B. and Vredenburg, V. T. 2008. Are We in the Midst of the Sixth Mass Extinction? A View from the World of Amphibians. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 105 (Supplement 1), 11466-11473.
-