

# The inimitable Ravi Sankaran I knew

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**H**e was junior in age, but we got along very well, since we first met at Manas Tiger Reserve, Assam, in 1984. That we shared in common a fondness for many things became evident at that first meeting. Of these, the fondness for feathered, spotted, and furry creatures, and a few common friends, endured the test of time.

Looking back on the three decades, and more, that I had known Ravi, today, I too feel like many of his more recent friends who have been posting comments on his page on Facebook—all of us wish we had been able to interact with Ravi for a longer period of time! I quote: “hey Ravi, keep forgetting that you are not there any more, miss you, want to argue/laugh with you and ask you stuff, get your crazy advice, hear your insults...no one’s written for a long time here, but we remember you...Aparajita” (21st May 2009; Facebook).

It is said that we must move on...that life goes on, moves on. The shock ebbs but not the tugging sorrow, which will remain a part of this life for all time to come.

He hid from my camera, but not from my company. I hardly have any photos of him, but memories and stories abound—of *bhindi* for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; of the black cobra that I had trapped in his insect net, unaware that a hole in the net had positioned the snake within a comfortable striking distance of my arm!

At his field station at Sailana, I recollect so well, how Ravi never failed to delight in the charming call of the Rain Quail *Coturnix coromandelica* as it reverberated—picked up by one male bird and then another, across their grassland habitat, as it turned green, with the advent of the monsoon rains. I was there to film the Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indica* at the start of its breeding season, and Ravi had embarked on his first major project of studying the breeding biology of this rare, elusive, and enigmatic bird, which included counting how many times a minute, the male bird leapt up in its crazy, carefree display.

Ravi had started his career under the uncompromising gaze, and the demanding tutelage, of Dr Asad Rahmani. When we met at Manas Tiger Reserve in Assam, Dr Rahmani, accompanied by Usha, and Ganden, was driving a battered old project jeep of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) across India—quite unmindful of its bent chassis—surveying bustard and florican habitat.

Ravi traveled in the back of the jeep, a lanky, dark lad with a shock of unruly hair, quite unconcerned that his occasional *beedi* smoking was frowned upon! The forest department folks at Manas promptly told me that the “boy” accompanying the party must be to look after the luggage and keep the *gaadi* clean! They also told me that he had a very big flute with him, and played it well!

Years later, when I related this story to Ravi he just grinned his usual grin, and was lost in a cloud of aromatic smoke as he fired up the pipe whipped out from his pocket, complete with Erinmore Flake tobacco, all the way from Denmark, to which he had now graduated!

Manas has the Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis*, and I had volunteered to show Dr Rahmani and party some of the grasslands where we knew the birds were present. When we assembled at Mathangudi bungalow in the morning, Ravi spoke too soon. He hardly knew his birds then and to cut a long story short, he promptly misidentified a dove as it landed in a nearby tree, calling it a shikra! This put him at the receiving end of a thorough dressing down delivered by Dr Rahmani.

This was just the beginning as Dr Rahmani again ticked Ravi off when he plucked the flower of a ground orchid and brought it for the party to see. The comment from Dr Rahmani went somewhat like this: “Why did you pluck it? It could be the last specimen of its kind. You must check before you destroy things”. I believe that such lessons learnt from a perfectionist, must surely have ingrained in Ravi the habit of double-checking facts, and not speaking too soon—lessons perhaps, that contributed in no small measure to his achievements as a scientist in later years.

It is indeed hard to forget the oversized flute, though I never did get to hear him playing it. To me now, it is a symbol that this chap did every thing on a grand scale!

It was at Sailana though, that Ravi promised to get me some honey of the big bees that make their hives in amongst the sheltered crannies of rocky outcrops. He never did get the honey, and right till our last meeting, a few months back, accused me of making his younger days “miserable” by reminding him about that unfulfilled promise!

As *bhindi* was our staple at Sailana, fantasizing about honey and good food was hardly surprising. And just down the road lived the former ruler of the area, in his regal residence. Though the old fort had been beaten down in brilliance by time and fate, the Sailana Raja had a formidable reputation as a master cook. So when we were invited to the fort there was much anticipation of exotic victuals like *pakor*as—and though the tea did not quite turn out that way, we were shown the huge and varied collection of the most unbelievable cacti, which Raja *sahib* had gathered with care, and was most passionate about. This was most fascinating.

Ravi went through a phase when he took brilliant photographs, and some of the very best of the Lesser Florican that I have seen. He was generous and handed the originals around, and the originals of some of his favorites never got returned to him. At Karera he decided to photograph a common Indian fox *Vulpes bengalensis* that had dened in the middle of the village road between the two ruts in which the local bus and other vehicles ran. He borrowed my canvas hide and set this up in a depression near the den. Next morning, while it was still dark, he took a cycle, which he hid in a ditch close to the hide, and positioned himself for photography.

Karera is one of the hottest places on Earth, as far as I am concerned, and temperatures reach well over 40°C by 0830 hrs. When we next saw Ravi, around 1000 hrs, bathed in sweat, there was disgust writ all over his face. No, the fox had not come to the

den. When he could not bear the stifling heat inside the hide any longer Ravi had got out only to see the fox sitting by the bicycle watching the hide!

The BNHS has always consisted of a bunch of the most brilliant, dedicated, and colourful characters, and Ali Hassan, the famed bird-catcher was all of this, and more! When I finally caught up with him at Karera, he was forever bragging about his ability to catch *any* bird, however big or small (after having recently failed to trap the Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps* in spite of several attempts!), and when we tried to get rid of him by asking him to catch the Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* feeding on the ground nearby, he *did* turn up with it in his hand in about an hour's time, much to our disgust!

Mehboob, Ali Hassan's son and assistant, was very good at wielding a stout stick as a weapon, and the skills to show off had been passed down from father to son in full measure! To shut Mehboob up and to save us from the disturbing sight, and whirring sound of his lethal stick as he twirled it over his head and side, passing it from one hand to the other with frightening precision, Ravi jumped into a well and dared Mehboob to do the same. Mehboob was too frightened even to look into the depths of the well let alone jump in, and was so respectful of Ravi's amazing feat that he actually became quite shy of showing off his stick craft!

Ravi's penchant, and sheer fascination for jumping into wells became legendary, earning him much respect from village folk, colleagues, and friends. I believe he finally gave up this sport of jumping into wells after he jumped into one where the water depth was far less than what he'd envisaged! But then, he never did talk about that one!

Being stuck down in a well is no fun for any length of time however cool the water may be! So, to beat the Karera heat Ravi found a fast drying 'drainage' near the asbestos roofed 'hut' that served as the BNHS field station. And to this we would retreat to while away the hottest part of the day. Water flowed under the sand and into a fair size pool and as we could never sit idle we took to catching fish. Not for the pot, but just a few to feed the bright eyed little mongoose that visited camp in the mornings. And then we caught this flat 'thing' with a ridged back and eyes on top of its head - obviously a bottom feeder but something about it seemed charming. Ravi suggested that it could possibly be the only one of its kind and promptly let it go. Dr Rahmani would have been pleased to hear that comment—but he was sitting in front of a large desert cooler back at the field station!

Shanthi and I discovered that our apartment in Chennai was very close to where Ravi's parents lived, when Ravi turned up at our doorstep one evening, with Simba and Kali, two boxers that belonged to his father, in tow. These visits were to become a regular feature, as were Simba's loud protest barks if Ravi stayed on for a third glass of beer! Ravi's pleadings, "please Simba, just half a glass...", would have little effect. Simba would claw the tiled floor in a furious digging motion and demonstrated to us that vitrified tiles were *not* scratch proof after all! Dogs were Ravi's great love, and an answer to many things. We guessed that Ravi's wife Deepa, had brought up the topic of having children when we received a frantic call from Ravi asking us to find him a fox terrier, as that would surely distract Deepa!! When their daughter Yamini, was born, the deeply caring, affectionate, and proud father in Ravi emerged, which to many of his friends, was quite a revelation!

Both Deepa, and Ravi loved riding horses, and according to some friends who were eyewitnesses, Ravi even smoked his pipe with relaxed ease while riding a camel. Shomita Mukherjee has a good story of Ravi riding a reluctant camel to lunch in a village 3 km away from their camp, and how he nearly missed out on the

good meal! This is posted on Dr Ravi Sankaran's page on Facebook and is a good read. There are other stories too which this writer would love to quote from but feels strongly are best read in the Facebook pages on the Internet [<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Dr-Ravi-Sankaran/59602514000>].

Anything for a good laugh was something Ravi lived by. We met up in Mumbai at the Taj, where a cousin sister of my wife Shanthi, was a well-known and senior member of the staff. Ravi insisted that we do a *tonga* ride around the Taj, much to our amusement, and the cousin's embarrassment, who dreaded being seen by her colleagues. She was totally perplexed by Ravi!

He met us at Port Blair airport when Shanthi and I visited the Andamans over Christmas and New Year in 2001–2002. He took us straight to the jetty and helped us board the *dungi* that would take us across the open sea to Havelock Island where friends were already in the midst of a major party. When Shanthi, a vegetarian, realised that the main party ingredient, a huge pig, was all trussed up at one end of the *dungi*, and traveling with us, she was not amused, but Ravi was, and very much so!

As if that was not enough, as the *dungi* pulled away from the jetty Ravi shouted out the details of discomforts caused by seasickness. But then Ravi was like that—he made light of things that would send others into a major depression and people around benefited from his outlook. His sister, Deepa, took a long time to forgive Ravi for dancing a gig singing, "Its broken! Its broken!", when her favorite porcelain vase fell on the floor and shattered! That was Ravi!

The sea was rough and we were thoroughly drenched by the spray. What was amazing, and in fact mesmerizing, was to experience the skills of the Karen boatmen as they took such a small craft across the open sea, braving huge waves, and yet staying a steady course without any visible effort or concern. And we were grateful that we did not suffer the perils of seasickness in spite of the dread that Ravi tried to instill in us!

In the Andamans, Ravi was totally convinced that the long-term survival of the endemic variety of the Edible-nest Swiftlet *Collocalia fuciphaga* could only be secured by cross-parenting, and the participation of nest collectors in protection. He spent much effort and showed how this could and should be done. Shanthi and I made a small video of this and have put it on Ravi's Facebook page for all to see [[http://www.facebook.com/pages/Dr-Ravi-Sankaran/59602514000?v=app\\_2392950137&viewas=0](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Dr-Ravi-Sankaran/59602514000?v=app_2392950137&viewas=0)].

Philosopher, Ravi certainly was not! He was grounded in realism. It revealed itself in what he said and in what he did. Donning the role of the devil's advocate came with ease to him, and he did this with much aplomb, drowning out others with his booming voice and extreme stand. To those who knew him well, it was obvious that he was provoking, so as to hear all sides of an argument before winding things down, and reaching an informed conclusion.

Need for flagging concrete around the house was one such debate: Deepa and Ravi had constructed on their farm near Coimbatore, and we had just finished our home at Whitefield, Bangalore. So when he visited us he declared with all the finality he could muster that flagging concrete around the building was a total waste and not needed at all! And then surprised Shanthi by calling all the way from Nagaland to discuss how best it could be done without spending too much money!

To have a chapter of BirdLife International in India was desirable, and not in argument. The big question mark hung over whether the many entities, all swearing allegiance to Indian ornithology, would work in harmony under such an umbrella organization—a situation that few would voice and even fewer confront. The reality of this question, that he posed, was the "cat"



he was pleased to release amongst the “pigeons”, and of which he had already told his friends before the meeting started.

Much has been said about Ravi’s contribution to science and conservation, his ability for hard work, his administrative skills as Director of SACON when he was so suddenly taken away from us all. At the memorial meeting held at Chennai, speaking eloquently about her mentor, one of Ravi’s students elucidated so well Ravi’s basic approach—he would constantly hammer in the conservation angle to his students, she told us, and would say, ‘What are you going to do with your petty PhDs? What are you going to do for the subject that you are studying, what are you going to give back to the habitat and the people in the area? Think about that.’

For years Ravi had been telling us to make a film on the grasslands, and would talk at length of the importance of these for water conservation, rural India, and wildlife. As much of Gujarat has had a good monsoon this year, Shanthi and I went looking for the Lesser Florican, and were pleased to find a good number jumping in the various grasslands. Ravi had taken a fuzzy photo of a male bird walking through the grass, with neck outstretched, and head plumes pointing forward, a possible threat display, which our common friend and reputed wildlife artist, Carl D’Silva, converted into a remarkable etching on glass that now adorns a space in our home. We were fascinated to see the same posture, assumed by a male bird, just two weeks back, as it moved purposefully forward through short grass, and also managed to record it on video. Looked like it was not too pleased to see a Black Partridge *Francolinus francolinus* too close to its jumping spot!

This once again brought on the emptiness that one feels without the enthusiastic and all effusive presence of Ravi—how

pleased he would have been to see the video of the florican with neck outstretched and head plumes pointing forward and even more so, as he had not described this in any detail in any of his published papers, but had only spoken of it in informal forums at the BNHS, at which Carl was also present.

While we were in Gujarat, a friend forwarded us an article that had appeared in the Indian Express on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August 2009.

“Selling bird’s nest soup to save this bird: there’s a change in law.”

The National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) had finally de-listed the Edible-nest Swiftlet for 3 years, to allow the sustainable harvesting of the bird’s nest to help the long-term survival of the species by involving nest collectors in the conservation effort. The proposal had been pending with the NBWL for three years. Ravi’s work in the Andamans had been directed exactly towards this. He would have been happy, but would also have insisted that a lot of work remained to be done, and directed some of his students towards the Andamans, if not headed out there himself!

Animals, birds, furry and feathered, smooth, spotted, striped and mottled creatures have lost someone who loved them so very much. Landscapes across the high mountains, flood plains of the Bengal Florican, the grassland and deserts of the Lesser Florican and the bustard all have lost a friend who represented them with passion, aided so well with an authority gained through scientific enquiry. But for me, my dear friend Ajith Kumar’s words on Facebook says it all—I copy and paste:

‘I’m’ said...“Lots of people like me are still grieving in silence, not for the loss to conservation, but for having lost a great friend; no words can express our sorrow...time cannot heal this wound”.



Photo: Ashish Chandola

Male Lesser Florican *Syrrhaptes indica* threat display. Glass etching by Carl D’Silva. Collection of Ashish & Shanthi Chandola.