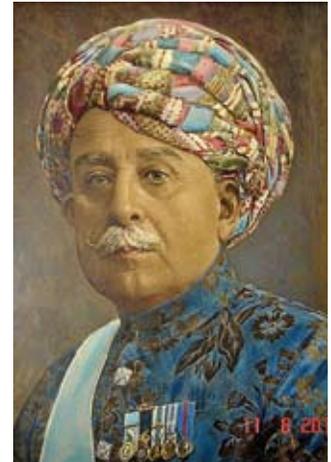


Gujarat royalty and Indian ornithology

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Maharao Khengarji III of Kachchh'

Ornithology is the science of bird study. It is different from other such sciences in that the subject of study, birds, are so visible and attractive that amateurs can undertake observations that add to the knowledge accumulation, provided certain simple scientific procedures are followed. Some outstanding papers have been written on the biology of individual species by housewives observing the goings on from their kitchen windows! The late Maharaj Kumar Dharmakumarsinhji would be a classic example of an absolute amateur who achieved full recognition as an ornithologist of enviable reputation. Khacher & Khacher (1986) have highlighted his unique contribution to not only ornithology, but natural history in general—of Saurashtra in particular and India in general. He was the epitome of how a shikari, a photographer, an artist, and a birdwatcher could carve for himself a niche, among scientists, without any formal scientific training. I consider it my very good fortune to have been closely associated with him from my early boyhood through life till I myself had created an identity of my own.

His nephew, Shivbhadrasinhji, the younger son of Maharaja Krshnakumarsinhji, is equally knowledgeable, as indeed he should be considering the exposure he got from the earliest childhood in a family of avid outdoor men. Unhappily, he writes in a rather desultory fashion though he could contribute immensely to natural history literature; the gun has been replaced by the camera and if nothing else, he has accumulated an outstanding record that would be of immense archival value, rivaling the footage and photographs of his uncle. Shivbhadrasinhji is an inspiration to a very active group of birdwatchers in Bhavnagar operating a nature club appropriately named after Dharmakumarsinhji.

From Bhavnagar in Saurashtra one goes to Mansa near Gandhinagar, a small principality, which gave us Divyabhanusinh Chavda who used his spare time from being a hotelier with India's premier Taj group of hotels, to give us two definitive books, one on the Asiatic Lion and the other on the Indian Cheetah; he finds a place here on the strength of his having written on Dharmakumarsinhji and prepared a bibliography of his writings (Dharmakumarsinhji 1998; Divyabhanusinh 1998a, b). Today in

retirement, he is President of World Wide Fund for Nature—India, and defers to me as his onetime teacher at the Rajkumar College, and has relationship with the Wankaner royal family represented here by Maharajkumar Ranjitsinh, who has written papers dealing with the Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps* among other natural history and conservation issues.

The Wankaner family, though not listed among contributors to Ornithology, other than for the pieces written by MK Ranjitsinh, has a singular distinction, in that for three generations, the family carefully looked after the grasslands of the former Wankaner State, resulting in the conservation of an unique ecosystem that provides sanctuary to the Great Indian Bustard and the Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indica* among other grassland-specific birds. Ranjitsinh's elder brother, and the present titular head of the family, Digvijaysinhji, enjoys an eminence in the field of conservation in his own right, having been a powerful political voice for the cause during his stints as member of the Gujarat Legislature, and later as member of the Lok Sabha. Interestingly, it would read like some medieval power politics when one learns that Divyabhanusinh's mother came from Wankaner, and the sisters of Ranjitsinh were married into the two leading conservation families of Gujarat, one to Shivbhadrasinhji of Bhavnagar and the other, now deceased, to MKS Himmatsinhji of Kachchh.

The Kachchh family is unique in that they have been contributing to ornithology for four generations! Maharao Khengarji (1866–1942¹) wrote on the newly located breeding site of the Large Flamingo in the Great Rann of Kachchh (Khengarji 1904) followed by a note on the Lesser Flamingo (Khengarji 1909). His son Vijayarajji (1885–1948²) wrote several notes for the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society (JBNHS)*, on goose shoots and other game birds (Vijayarajji 1912, 1913, 1932). He supported the late Salim Ali's ornithological surveys of Kachchh. Then, we have notes by Madansinhji (1949, 1957, 1977), again on game birds, while his youngest brother Himmatsinhji wrote on a great variety of bird observations throughout his life (at least 71 papers from 1959–2007). A couple of years prior to his demise, he had been writing very readable and highly appreciated pieces for the Gujarati bird publication *Vihang*. He had been working on the upgradation of Salim Ali's *Birds of Kutch* (1945) during

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khengarji_III_of_Kutch.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vijayarajji>.

³ Downloaded on 10 November 2010 from: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7c/Maharao_Khengarji_III.jpg.

the last years of his life. I would like to see the upgrading of the book by Jugal Kishore Tiwari who has been doing great work in popularising Kachchh as a birding venue, and who had the full appreciation of Himmatsinhji. Himmatsinhji encouraged a number of local birdwatchers in Kachchh, who are doing excellent field observations and regularly writing for *Vihang*. The baton has been effectively passed on from the royal to the plebeian bearers to keep Kachchh in the forefront of ornithology in the state of Gujarat, and in India.

Himmatsinhji was one year senior to me at the Rajkumar College, Rajkot, and the friendship we developed at school continued through life till his passing away. A month before his demise, he spoke to me on the ubiquitous mobile phone, from across the Gulf of Kachchh, as I was being shown a nesting pair of Black-necked Storks *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* in the Khijadiya Waterbird Sanctuary near Jamnagar. He had been updating notes on that very species in Kachchh! While I can claim generating public awareness for the notification of the Marine National Park, and the Khijadiya Sanctuary, it is the present Jam Saheb Sataji who 'pointed' me to get the action started. It is a pity, the Jam Saheb has not written notes on the birds and other natural history of the erstwhile Jamnagar State, as his knowledge is unrivalled for its personal exposure. And as for me, I shall always consider whatever I saw and learnt in his 'territory' as material borrowed from him. Though after Dharmakumarsinhji and Himmatsinhji, I have the largest number of writings (see Pittie's bibliography later in this issue), I feel I have not done enough considering what I could have, had I followed Salim Ali's advise and maintained a regular and detailed diary through life. So, when I remonstrated with Himmatsinhji for not having written more, pat came his wry rejoinder, "A pot calling the kettle black!" It is fitting that I conclude this piece by referring to my cousin the late Durbar Shivraj Kumar Khachar of Jasdan for his very qualitative support to the cause of ornithology in Gujarat. Apart from a series of first records for our area in central Saurashtra appearing in the *JBNHS*, he has to his credit among

the very first photographs of the Great Indian Bustard and the Lesser Frigatebird to appear in that journal (in all he published 37 papers during 1949–1992). Both of us bird-watched together and developed a very close and affectionate association with Salim Ali. He underwrote the cost of intensive bird banding for the BNHS at Hingolghadh Sanctuary, Jasdan. He also participated in several bird banding camps with Salim Ali in Kachchh.

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Roosting behaviour of Franklin's Nightjar *Caprimulgus affinis*

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Introduction

Paneli vidi (22°49'N 70°56'E) is a scrub forest and grassland located near Morbi, my hometown, in Rajkot district, Gujarat. I have been observing a flock of roosting Franklin's Nightjars *Caprimulgus affinis* for the past one year. My observations are given here.

On an evening in late August 2008, while trying to photograph a Marshall's Iora *Aegithina nigrolutea* in breeding plumage, I stumbled upon a flock of Franklin's Nightjars that was roosting by the side of a road. The area was stony with sparse scrub. I almost walked right on to them before four birds suddenly flushed, and settled nearby. I scrutinised the ground carefully and found