because of which the very fabric of Kachchh's pastoral society was being torn asunder. The Great Indian Bustard and the Lesser Florican would need to be highlighted along with the magnificent, large-horned cattle of the area. Indian birds need native Indian flora and if there can be one essence of so many years of concern for conservation of wildlife, there has to be an informed stand against widespread introduction of exotic plants and monoculture practices.

# Redeeming indigenous nomenclature of birds[1]

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A few months ago I was in Kodaikanal and I visited a single room library that opens three days in a week. Rummaging through the stacks, I hit upon a treasure. In the early 1930s, a certain Edward G. Nichols who lived in Madurai kept careful notes of the birds he sighted in Madurai and Kodaikanal and published the list in two installments in the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* (Nichols 1937, 1944a,b, 1945). These reprints are bound and kept in the library.

What's new? You may ask. Nichols did not merely prepare the checklist; he went a step further and documented the Tamil names of these birds. The person who helped him in recording the local names was P. Bonnel, a Tamilian from Tirunelveli; later he was in the faculty of the Madras Christian College and was professor emeritus when I was a student. Because of his passion for birds, he was known as 'Paradise Bird Bonnel'.

What Nichols did is significant because the Tamil names of birds are disappearing due to a lack of usage. I believe that for the conservation movement to be successful, particularly bird conservation, we have to retrieve indigenous nomenclature. Not just the names of birds, but of the other creatures as well...of mammals, reptiles and so on. For instance, the Tamil name for King Cobra '*karunagam*' has already gone out of vogue and a translation of the two words in the English name has taken over. If you go the old museums, you will see the original Tamil name on the label.

Before proceeding further I must make it clear that I am not into language politics here but only into conservation and how that cause can be furthered, by redeeming traditional names.

The concepts and ideas concerning Tamil nomenclature would apply to other languages also—such as Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam—since all have been subjected to the distortions brought in by colonialism. The British derisively referred to these languages as 'vernacular', a word from a root which means 'slave'. Of these languages I am familiar only with Tamil: so I will restrict my observations to this language.

What is happening now in this front? As a short cut, translators, who have a condescending attitude to local language, even if it is their mother tongue, translate the English name and use it in Tamil? However in the rural areas, the original Tamil names are used. So you already have a Diglossia problem, in having two sets of names, creating confusion for people and researchers. When we use the translated name, it does not make any sense to the people.

The English names themselves are a recent creation, often concocted from the point of view of the British, Like 'Indian Robin' or 'The Grey-headed Flycatcher'. Do you see why in India, bird watching as a hobby is restricted largely to the English-speaking crowd? Most of the Tamil names are a single word like *kuyil* (koel) or *kili* (parakeet). Ponderous, compound names such as 'Malabar whistling thrush' will not be part of popular culture. It will not find a place in popular imagination.

For all the creatures, both birds and mammals that we have been with for hundreds of years, there are local names. These names are not just sounds. They are little capsules of knowledge. Some of them describe the behaviour of the bird, some its appearance while others the habitat. Large Pied Wagtail which frequents the *dhobi ghats* is called *Vannathi kuruvi* (Washer-woman bird); Hill Myna is *Naiyandi kuruvi* for its propensity to mimic. While walking in Periyar sanctuary, our guide pointed to a Ruby-throated Bulbul and called it *Manikandan* (Jewell-throated). But the best I have come across is the Tamil name for Shama—it is called *Solaipadi* (the one that sings in the shola. The Tamil word *solai* is the root of the term Shola). Early taxonomists have coined scientific names of some species around the Tamil names.

But there are also 'problems' with Tamil names arising from regional dialects. One species is known by different names in different regions of Tamil Nadu; Pitta, which is known by four names, is a good example. Similarly, different species of birds of one or more genera are known by just one name—quails and partridges are examples.

Some of the bird names have been in parlance for hundreds of years. In Tamil literature, there are lexicons, called *nigandu* that have come down from 8th to 10th century AD.

There are at least three *nigandus*, in which there are lists of birds, animals and trees, among other things. Many names of birds also occur in inscriptions.

My observation is that many of these traditional names are still in vogue in rural areas. It is in the urban area that they have gone out of parlance. Many Tamil names of birds that have gone out of use in India, survive in Sri Lanka. In fact G.

[1] Based on a paper read at the Bird Fair Conference at Gandhigram, Tamil Nadu on 4.ii.2006.

M. Henry in his *Guide to the birds of Ceylon* (1971) provides these names. So it is necessary to redeem these names and bring them back into use. New names may spell disaster. As the saying goes, "Every innovation disturbs more by its novelty than benefits by its utility."

There have been sporadic attempts at making a checklist of birds with their names in Tamil. M. Krishnan used the traditional names in the Tamil essays he wrote. In 1956 the Government of Tamil Nadu brought out *Kalaikalanjiyam***,** a ten-volume Tamil encyclopedia. All the entries on birds, by M. Krishnan and P. Bonnel (yes…the 'Paradise Bird') had traditional Tamil names. The Tamil names in Salim Ali's *Book of Indian birds* are replete with errors and even after pointing these out, each new edition carries the same names.

The next attempt was in 1968 when M. A. Badshah of the Indian Forest Service published, through the department, *A checklist of birds of Tamil Nadu***.** He records in the preface of the book, "I have been collecting the Tamil names ever since I started service in the early thirties but still I am not satisfied with the material I have gathered. My ambition was to prepare a more comprehensive list of birds but I feared that life will not allow me to go on indefinitely on this errand and therefore I have decided to publish whatever I have collected and leave the rest to the coming generation."

How can we carry the message of bird conservation to people unless we retrieve the traditional nomenclature? If a researcher is familiar with these names, then she can delve into ancient or medieval literature and arrive at the provenance of bird species in traditional ethnic literature.

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# Sirkeer Malkoha *Taccocua leschenaultii*: its habitat and origin of name

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Though published in 2004, my copy of *Buceros* (vol. 9 no. 2), devoted exclusively to Aasheesh Pittie's "A dictionary of scientific bird names originating from the Indian region", arrived almost a year later. The subject was so well introduced that there was no putting away the slim volume till I read it through, from cover to cover, in one sitting. The background to the origin of most names is fascinating.

But what intrigued me was my name in the list of "acknowledgements" at the end. And with that hangs this tale of unraveling the origin of the name of one Indian bird. Aasheesh had come across the word "Sarkanda" (*Typha angustifolia*) in the text of one of my articles. So he wanted to know all about Sarkanda, especially whether there was any association between Sarkanda and the name "Sirkeer" of a malkhoa?

I told Aasheesh about this bush of reeds, each five to eight feet tall, and some 20 to 50 reeds in unison, constituting one unit. In the Punjab of pre-1947, when it comprised the better part of contemporary Pakistan and all of Himachal, Haryana and the Union Territory of Chandigarh, the Sarkanda grew in profusion on the fringes of the sandy beds of rivers and seasonal streams. Now it is a less common sight because of excessive commercial exploitation.

Each reed is topped with a 9 to 12 inches long, delicate, compact and feathery plume. The plume flowers from December to February and when seen on a sunny day and in a gentle breeze, the sight of flowers shimmering like silver tinsel is most attractive. To be standing on a prominence above a riverbed full of the shimmering sea of Sarkanda-in-flower on a full moon night was an experience fit for the Gods. On a lesser scale and with effort it is there for the taking even now.

During the monsoons, a long and soft green sheath covers each reed. Sarkanda bushes also grew in thick clusters on the banks of agricultural irrigation channels and acted as most effective soil-binders. Among the trees that dotted the banks of these channels were kikar (*Acacia arabica*) and wild date palm (*Phoenix sylvestris*). Such a setting was invariably a favorites site for breeding colonies of the weaver birds (Ploceidae). The Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus* and the Crow-pheasant *Centropus sinensis* also favoured the Sarkanda bush, mainly as a roost, though the Black Francolin occasionally also nested in it.

Sarkanda also grew in the Gangetic plain, on the arid fringes of the Thar Desert, and in the foothills and ravines all along the Shivaliks. It formed a thick, continuous belt on either side of the international border with Pakistan from Jammu to Gurdaspur (Punjab) and again in parts of Rajasthan.

Along this border, where human presence was minimal, the Sarkanda jungle was home to a large presence of Grey *F. pondicerianus* and Black Francolin, wild boar *Sus scrofa*, nilgai *Bocelaphus tragocamelus*, golden jackal *Canis aureus* and occasionally an enterprising leopard *Panthera pardus* as well!

In the Jammu–Pathankot region, I had on many an occasion in 1959–1960 and again in 1969–1972 come across the Sirkeer Malkoha around Sarkanda bushes. These observations now stand clearly validated by the distribution maps for this species in Kazmierczak (2000) and Grewal et al. (2002).