



Obituary

Jamshed P. Irani: A rare bird watcher

The tribe of bird watchers in India has grown satisfyingly over the years, but on 28 April 2026 ornithologists across India mourned a rare bird watcher. Not only did he observe every detail of a bird, the bird on paper or canvas with supreme artistry and scientific rigor. After completing a diploma in Commercial Art from the Sir J. J. School of Arts, Bombay, in 1958, the world of ornithology was fortunate that he was discovered and mentored by India's foremost ornithologist, Sálím Ali, from 1963. His first assignment was to create plates for the monumental ten volume *Handbook of The Birds of India and Pakistan* and Jamshed Irani has the distinction of being the only artist who has plates in every volume of the Handbook.

Sálím Ali was a perfectionist; both as regards his own work and that of others. It is a testimony to Jamshed Irani's own commitment to excellence that Dr. Salim Ali turned to him for the illustrations for so many bird plates: in *The Book of Indian Birds* and in *The Birds of the Eastern Himalayas* and in *Common Birds* by Salim Ali and Laeeq Futehally and for a poster when BNHS was searching for the elusive Jerdon's Courser. In addition, Jamshed also illustrated *Our Feathered Friends* by U. Chopra and *Watching Birds* by Jamal Ara. He was commissioned by the late King of Bhutan, Jigmi Dorji, to paint four birds in oil on canvas for the palace. While all his illustrations of birds demanded exacting scientific accuracy, Jamshed also produced artistically beautiful renditions of birds and other type of wild life, some of which were reproduced as greeting cards and even postage stamps. His talent was such that he could capture the essence of a wide variety of natural subjects - fish to butterflies to tigers and mountain scenery.

The postal department first contacted him for paintings of birds but, having discovered his talent, challenged his versatility on a wide range of subjects - from women pilots to portraits of eminent personalities and from flowers to the Konkan Railways, The Scindia School and The International Leprosy Congress!

Slim to the point of looking emaciated, generous yet humble and self-effacing, Jamshed Irani was a person who won the hearts and the respect of all those who knew him. After working for 32 years with Larsen & Toubro (L&T), he retired as a Senior Manager - Advertising in 1996. But Jamshed never retired from expressing the creative excellence that was the hallmark of his life. Jamshed made a mark that no other contemporary Indian artist has made in the field of ornithology and it was fitting that he was awarded the 2003 gold medal of the Salim Ali Loke Wan Tho Ornithological Research Fund of the BNHS. Astonishingly, in the 1980s at the age of 42, when his right hand was incapacitated by a freak accident, Jamshed trained his left hand to create artistic work with the same precision and beauty that he earlier created with his right hand.

Jamshed Irani was not one to rest on his laurels or to become stereotypical and, when he was already in his 80s, he was creating exquisite renditions of birds, butterflies and flowers in silk thread embroidery, and doing intricate carvings on Emu egg shells and in wood. Born in the beautiful little cantonment town of Devlali, Jamshed loved nature and loved painting nature from an early age. His parents, Khorshed and Pirojshaw Irani were wise and caring enough to encourage his talent and in his final years Jamshed escaped from Bombay to the natural beauty of his farm in Karjat. Jamshed has gone but his legacy lives on in the publications referred to by ornithologists in India.

– Dilnavaz Variava

Former CEO of WWF-India, Vice President of BNHS and Steering Committee Member of The National Board for Wildlife

