

# Human-bird relations in India

## *An Interdisciplinary Study*



A Preliminary Report By  
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This study is an initiative of Environmental Humanities Research Group (EHRG) at IITGN aims at collaborative learning, unlearning and relearning about various aspects of environment and society, with a special emphasis on marginalized and vulnerable populations of humans and nonhumans. EHRG@IITGN emphasizes more on local communities' worldviews with respect to human-dimension of the environment.

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# **Chapter.1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Why study human-bird relations?**

A birdwatcher's paradise, India has over 1,300 bird species, 75 of which are endemic, making it a premier destination for birdwatching (Grewal & Singh 2020). With such diversity, birdwatching has gained much traction in India. In recent decades, from merely being a leisure or research activity, it has evolved to be one of the visible manifestations of today's growing urban Indian middle class. (Urfi 2012). Keeping birdwatching at the centre of the discourse, our study aims to offer an interdisciplinary understanding of human-bird relations. In doing so, this preliminary report explores the history, sociology and ethno-ornithology of birdwatching in India and delves into the multiple ways humans connect to their feathered friends. The cultural dimension of human-bird relations, how, where and why birdwatching is carried in India, as well as technology and birdwatching, are among the topics this report covers. We draw from online surveys, ad-hoc interviews with birdwatchers in Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar (both in Gujarat, India), telephonic interviews, and a number of published literature and archival material. The report contributes to the literature on birdwatching and discusses human-bird relations in India.



## **1.2 Methodology**

Various methods have been employed to collect the data this project demanded. The majority of the data incorporated into this report comes from online surveys and in-depth personal interviews complemented by secondary data sources such as books and peer-reviewed journal articles. A google form comprising 30 questions in three sections, i.e., i) demographic details of the respondent, ii) attributes of birdwatching and iii) technology used by the respondent, was posted across 36 Facebook groups related to birdwatching and wildlife in May 2020 and kept open for one month. Besides, the form was floated in different WhatsApp groups during the same period. Within a stipulated time, we received around 450 responses. The study was carried out in multiple phases from 2018 to 2022.

To better understand how social media and birdwatching are intertwined in the birdwatching community, we conducted eleven in-depth telephonic interviews with birdwatchers using a semi-structured interview guide. From our pool of potential birdwatchers, we selected those who have accumulated between 2 and 30 years of experience. The questions ranged from the social media platform used to live stream birdwatching to how and why social media is used. The rationale behind conducting telephonic interviews roots back to the Covid-19 pandemic situation in India.

### 1.3 Brief on Chapters

The report contains four chapters, each of which deals with dynamic themes and topics related to birds, birdwatchers and birdwatching. Chapter 2, titled Understanding Human Bird relations, explores the multiple cultural and non-utilitarian ways humans connect to birds. Taking an ethno-ornithological standpoint, it delves into understanding how human-bird relations are mediated by culture, religion and human affection. The chapter challenges the anthropocentric and human chauvinistic portrayal of human-bird relations as merely materialistic and utilitarian. Chapter 3, titled Birdwatching a Brief History, attempts to offer a brief history of birdwatching, focusing on the structural evolutions it underwent over time. It also provides a brief account of the colonial history of birdwatching in India, emphasizing how the practice of birdwatching was carried out by different colonial ornithologists. Chapter 4, Who are Birdwatchers, explores how the practice of birdwatching is carried and conceived by birdwatchers across India.



## **2. Understanding Human-Bird Relations: Beyond Materialism**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Humans and animals share a history of relations with each other (Ingold 1994). From ancient times to the modern day, animals continue to be of material, utilitarian and symbolic importance to societies worldwide. Ranging from reliance on animals for sustenance to the religious and cultural significance attached to them to the expression of endearment, human's association with their animal "others" remain multifaceted. While, on the one hand, animality is frequently asserted as inferior to humankind (Mullin 1999), on the other, it is perceived as having equal or superior importance. That is to say, human's association with their animal "others" is multifarious and subjected to multiple layers of reality.

Birds have long been considered one of the most important species of Animalia by humans. Counting more than 10,000 extant species across the globe, they are one of the most "conspicuous groups of animals" in the modern world (Brusatte et al. 2015). Their skeletal traits, such as feathers, toothless beaks, hollow bones, perching feet, wishbones, deep breastbones, and stumplike tailbones, distinguish them from other living creatures (Padian and Chiappe 1998). Throughout history,

birds -- domesticated and wild -- have contributed greatly to human subsistence, economy, social structure, and ideology (Albarella et al. 2020). Historically, many different species of birds, particularly psittacines (family of parrots and parakeets), have been taken from the wild to live as companions in human households and institutions.

From hunting them for dietary needs to watching them as a leisure activity and to cultural and religious affairs, the human-bird relations is fascinating. Focusing on this diversity, this chapter attempts to explore different facets of human-bird interaction from a ‘socio-ecological’ standpoint. In doing so, it delves deeper into understanding how the relationship humans share with birds is mediated by culture, religion, and affection. While we acknowledge the material importance of birds to the human race, throughout the sections to follow, we offer a counter-narrative against the anthropocentric notion of human-bird relations as merely material and utilitarian.

## **2.2 Human-Bird Relations Beyond Materialism**

Over the millennia, humans have exploited different avian species for their flesh, eggs, skin and feathers (both for clothing and decorative items), among others (Anderson 2012). Perhaps, as a result of this longstanding material relationship, human intimacy with birds is generally considered merely utilitarian and material. This particular section of the chapter is intended to highlight that the bird-human affinity has meanings beyond materialism, and human’s/our

association with birds is often mediated by culture, leisure, affection and feelings like fear and anxiety. Based on literary and ethnographic evidence, we demonstrate how the human-bird relations are constructed, nourished and maintained by factors other than material demands across time, place and contexts. In doing so, we first explore how different birds are ascribed with cultural values among different indigenous communities, along with how omens in different regional contexts ascribe birds to non-material value and importance. Then we set out to explore how birds are viewed and bird identities are constructed under two religious worldviews, i.e., Hinduism and Islam. Thereafter, we bring about the examples of the Demoiselle Cranes of Khichan in Rajasthan and *Chabutra* of Ahmedabad to demonstrate how human-bird relations are mediated by human affection and care.

### **2.3 Indigenous Communities and Birds**

It goes without saying that animals contribute value to human lives not only because they provide a number of utilitarian and economic benefits but because they are embedded in our sense of place and through long-established cultural traditions (Alves and Barboza 2018). Birds have always been part of how humans imagine themselves, their environment, temporality and space. This ranges from how different communities date back to their origin or symbolic relationship with birds to the domestication of birds as a means of pleasure.

Worldwide, many indigenous groups view both themselves and nature as part of an extended family sharing ancestry and origins (Salmon 2000). Birds are among the many species that indigenous people across the world ascribe to cultural meanings and values. It is not uncommon for different indigenous communities to have myths of origin and other stories that relate themselves to various birds. The Karbis of Assam, for instance, believe that they originated from the egg of a mythical bird called *Wo Plak Pi* (Sarma and Barpujari 2011). Hornbill, according to their beliefs, saved a member of the *Terang* clan from being harmed by his brother. The Greater Racquet-tailed Drongo (*Dicrurus paradiseus*) is referred to as the king of birds and compared to the traditional chief of the community (Timung and Singh 2016). A similar story comes from the Santals of eastern India. *Thakur Jiu*, the creator, made two humans out of the earth, and once they were about to breathe, a creature called *Sin-Sadom* destroyed them. Consequently, he created two beautiful *Has-Hasil* birds (geese) and landed them on earth. These birds bore two eggs from which the first humans were born, a boy and a girl (Hansdak 2015).

Birds constitute a significant place in the spiritual imaginations and symbolisms of Native American communities. Hartz (2009) observes that Native American oral traditions attribute special powers to birds, such as the ability to carry messages from the sky to the ground. The eagle, for example, she notes, “embodies a strong spiritual presence, one that communicates between Earth and the most powerful forces of

the universe” (14). Along similar lines, Raven is considered to be a cultural hero who is kind and compassionate towards humans. A story prevalent among the Haida people of the Northwest coast of US regarding their origin is that Raven while walking along the shores, found a clamshell with tiny people in it. Then they were coaxed out by the raven and became Haida ancestors (48).

The aboriginal groups in Australia believe hills, rivers and animals, including birds, descend from the divine beings that created the world. Similarly, the people of lower Murray, Australia, believe that the *ngaitji* (birds, plants, sun, wind, but mostly birds) existed during the region’s creation and were regarded as their ancestors. In a story by Haida aboriginals of Canada, the loon and a raven appear as the saviours of humankind. When the world was submerged in water because of floods, the loon summoned the god of the clouds to restore the earth, and the raven led people back to land. Among the Maori people of New Zealand, three bird species, namely the New Zealand pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*), Great-winged petrel (*Pterodroma macroptera*) and Sooty shearwater (*Ardenna grisea*), are considered to be of spiritual importance (Tidemann and Gosler 2010). This way, among different indigenous communities across the world, birds constitute cultural and spiritual importance.

## 2.4 Bird Omens as Bird Agency (?)

Omens are often connected to certain birds. They are one of the important means through which humankind connects to the birds. The existence of bird omens, we argue, challenges the anthropocentric narratives of humans as at the centre of the environment to some respect, and it gives birds what we prefer to call an ‘unintended agency’, where the presence, actions and behaviours of birds are taken into serious consideration by humans. Among our arguments is that humans drawing omens from birds provides a great deal of non-material and powerfully symbolic value to birds. In the following passages, we provide examples of how different bird behaviours are perceived and valued as omens in different parts of the world.

Starting with India, one of the earliest attempts to record and interpret bird omens in the region dates back to *Brihat Samhita*, an ancient scripture written by Varaha Miriha in the sixth century A.D. In a chapter devoted to omens, Varaha Miriha interprets different bird behaviours based on their timing, positionality, gender, sound and direction of movement, along with others<sup>1</sup>. He considers omens as the fruition of human deeds done in their previous birth. Birds, according to him, get intoxicated in certain seasons owing to their sexual cravings, and their omens are to be taken seriously during those times.

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<sup>1</sup> Brihat Samhita translated by Shastri and Bhat (1946).



For example, referring to sage Parasara, he highlights that cuckoos, cranes and peacocks are intoxicating alike in both vernal and monsoons, as parrots, crows, and doves are in monsoon. Some of the omens that he described based on the direction of the movement are: The cuckoo's cry on the left side of the traveller is favourable; vultures, peacocks, and hawks are beneficial to travellers on the right side; it is fortunate if a traveller sees an odd number of birds moving from left to right. Spotting nocturnal birds like pingala (spotted owl, *Athene brama*), during the day, he observes, signals the destruction of the king. Having a dove sit on, or build a nest on, a vehicle, a seat, or a bed is harmful. The grey variety causes negative consequences within a year, while the variegated one takes six months. Consequences related to the saffron-coloured dove occur within a day. Likewise, many such bird omens are covered in the scripture.

Other important textual sources of bird omens in India come from colonial ethnographies. The colonial archives we accessed revealed a number of such omens that existed in India back then and may have extended to current times. H. A. Rose, a Civil Servant in British India, for instance, discusses a number of bird omens in his 1911 book *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*. He focuses on how the behaviour and the presence of certain birds, along with other animals, are interpreted across the aforementioned region. Starting with the owl, if it hoots thrice at one's house, they must abandon it for 3, 7 or 11 days, placing thorns at the

door; and in the meanwhile, a feast to brahmins, goat sacrifice and offering a broken coconut must be carried before re-entering the house. To see a kingfisher on one's way for hunting gets unlucky. For a person starting up a business, seeing the bird Indian roller (*Coracias benghalensis*) passing by his left side is auspicious. In a similar vein, R. E. Enthoven (1924), another British civil servant, discussed omens related to birds that existed in the Bombay presidency. Birds like a crow (*Corvus sp*), falcon (*Falco jugger*), and Ringed turtle-dove (*Streptopelia roseogrisea*) appear in his work, among the others. In the case of the Ringed turtle-dove, a calamity is presumed to be imminent in the house of those who see the Turtle-dove. Crow, on the contrary, when seen playing on the ground in pairs, is considered inauspicious. The Gazetteer 1907 mentions that the people of Trichinopoly (now Tiruchirappalli), Tamil Nadu considered the cry of a Brahminy kite as a good omen and the Indian cuckoo crossing one's path from right to left a bad.

Many such omens are observed in different parts of the globe. A study by Msimanga (2000) about the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe reveals how the community perceives certain behaviours of different birds. The cry of the Fork-tailed drongo (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) near someone's home, for instance, is believed to bring bad luck. Similarly, if the Ground hornbill (*Bucorvus abyssinicus*) calls in the morning, it heralds rain, while if it calls in the evening, it indicates the death of an elderly person. Another death-related omen prevalent in the Malabar

region of India is that if the Mottled wood owl, *Strix ocellata*) hoots at night, one can expect a death in the morning at their home or surroundings. Nightjar is another bird, the sound of which is believed to presage death; the belief that its whistling at night will cause a funeral to pass around in the morning is reported to have been prevalent among the Kaguru people of Tanzania (Beidelman 1963). Crow is considered both auspicious and inauspicious, considering its behaviour and how it is seen. In some regions of India and Asia, the caw of a crow nearby a house in the morning foreshadows the arrival of guests. At the same time, seeing a crow bathing is believed to bring bad luck. Among different caste communities of Kerala, the Jungles crows are believed to be the reincarnation of the deceased from the family. An example of how the deceased relives through crows, or at least their presence is imagined through them, can be drawn from a ritual called *baliyidal* observed by the Vettuvas. *Baliyidal* is the practice of feeding the crows, imagining them as the souls of the deceased, beginning the day after death and lasting sixteen days. In order to draw the attention of the crows, one of the family members imitates their sound with applause. It is believed that if crows appear and consume the food they offer, the soul of the deceased is liberated and at peace, and if not, it dignifies the soul as unpeaceful.



*Figure 1 Sculpture of humans and cranes in a temple in Tamil Nadu  
(Photo: Ramjee Nagarajan)*

## **2.5 Birds as Depicted in Hinduism and Islam**

Coming to how human-bird relations are posited in and by religion(s), birds, symbolically and otherwise, constitute important roles in different religious imaginations across the globe. Waldau (2005) maintains that religious traditions contribute to the transmission of views of the world around us across time and place, and they have thus influenced human minds in terms of how they place animals into their “communities of concern” (68). While the contemporary academic expressions, according to him, adhere mainly to the western anthropocentric bias that “humans alone are intellectually complex, capable of emotional depth and commitment” (68), religions engage with other living beings as morally and spiritually significant. Birds, thus, have historically been regarded as prominent creatures in diverse

religious traditions around the world. In the following passages, we briefly discuss how birds are signified in different religious traditions.

Hinduism has long been at the centre of scholarly discourses pertaining to ecology and environment in relation to religions and spirituality (e.g., Robinson and Cush 1997; Nelson 1998; Tucker and Chapple 2000; Krishna 2017). When it comes to birds, it can be observed that Hinduism attributes immense religious significance to birds. Several Indian temples have stone carvings of birds and humans (Figure 1). From crows to cranes, a number of birds occupy positions of religious significance in Hinduism. Crows, for instance, as mentioned earlier, are regarded as the departed souls of family members among different caste communities. Different birds like peafowl, owl, and swan serve as *vahanas* (Hindi word for vehicles) of various divine entities. Peafowl and swan are, respectively, vehicles for Ayaippan/Kartikeya, the son of lord shiva (see cover page of this report) and Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and music. Owl, on the other hand, is the vehicle of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Among the Gondi people, the Sarus crane (*Grus antigone*) is considered sacred and revered (Russel and Lal 1916). Apparently, the species is also sacred to Buddhist and Shakta sects, as Bagalamukhi, the goddess of black magic and poison, is depicted as crane-headed (Krishna 2008). Among the Monpa community of Arunachal Pradesh, there is a belief that the Black-necked crane (*Grus nigricollis*) is associated with the incarnation of the 6th Dalai Lama.

Islam doesn't ascribe sanctity to birds, but birds have an important role in Islamic discourses on prophecy, kindness and the environment. The terms "bird" and "birds" have been mentioned in the Holy Quran approximately 5 and 15 times, respectively. The avian kind has been, in one way or another, presented as guides, friends and visions in narratives linked to the prophets of Islam. Starting with Adam, the first of the long lineage of Islamic prophets, the Quran mentions two ravens sent to his son Quabeel who murdered his brother Habeel over jealousy. Quabeel did not know what to do with the corpse, as the practice of burial was not known to him. One of the ravens demonstrated the practice of burial by killing his companion and digging the earth to bury the killed bird. Since Habeel was the first one to die on the earth, it is generally assumed under Islamic traditions that the human race learnt the practice of burial from the raven. Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) is another bird popular among the scholars of Islam as it was befriended by King Sulaiman (Solomon), a prophet who was blessed with the ability to talk to animals. The Hoopoe, popularly known as *Hudhud*, was said to be a messenger and emissary to the prophet who used to deliver him information from different parts of the world. Serving birds was acclaimed to be a good deed by the prophet Mohammad.

Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) is mentioned three times in the Quran as a blessing sent down to the people of Moses in Israel. First, it appears in the chapter *The Cow* in a verse that reads: "We made the clouds cover

you with shade, and sent manna and quails down to you, saying, ‘Eat the good things. We have provided for you.’ It was not Us they wronged; they wronged themselves” (Koran 2:57), (see Abdel 2004). Another verse reads: Children of Israel, we rescued you from your enemies. We made a pledge with you on the right-hand side of the mountain. We sent down manna and quails for you” (Koran 20:80).

The question of whether religions can save birds has to be placed under the larger question of what contribution religions can make toward environmental stewardship. The effectiveness of any religion on environmental conservation depends highly on how strongly its followers believe in its precepts and injunctions and the transmission and adaptation of them in everyday life (Dwivedi 1993). It is important to acknowledge how different religious traditions across the world “are beginning to respond in remarkably creative ways” (Tucker and Chapple 2000) toward environmental problems. These ‘religio-environmental’ mobilizations may directly or indirectly help the conservation of bird species.

## **2.6 Where Birdness and Humanness Meet**

From pigeons to geese, humans have historically domesticated birds of different kinds. While domestication, as the Cambridge dictionary defines it, is “the process of bringing animals or plants under human control in order to provide food, power, or company”. Feeding wild pigeons and water feeders around us in the summer aptly exemplifies

how deeply humans, many of them, if not all, care for their feathered friends. In this section, using two examples, we discuss how “animality” and humanity are intersected in two particular locations, demonstrating the ways in which human-bird relations are mediated by affection and compassion. First, from Khichan village of Rajasthan (Demoiselle Crane migrations) and the second, from Ahmedabad, Gujarat (*Chabutra*, the pigeon feeding platforms).

Let us start off with the case of the Demoiselle Crane migrations. Demoiselle crane (*Anthropoides virgo*) is a migratory bird with an estimated population of c.2,30,000-2,61,000 (Birdlife International 2023). They are known to be present in Eastern Asia, Central Asia, Kalmykia, the Black Sea, the Atlas Plateau of northern Africa and Turkey. India is one of their main wintering grounds, where they feed on agricultural or stubble fields, roost in shallow water, and breed in marshes and mudflats (Meine and Archibald 1996). While such migrations are common, in 2000, India became a talking point and received enough media attention for the backstory it held. We are talking about the Khichan village in Rajasthan, where more than 40,000 Demoiselle Cranes migrate every year<sup>2</sup>. The question of why these species migrate in abundant numbers leads us to a native of the village named Ratanlal Mallo, who started feeding pigeons in the

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<sup>2</sup> The information incorporated into this chapter about the crane migrations comes from a few articles, documentaries and other reports published online between 2004 and 2010. Please see the references.



1970s to procure a good job. Initially, it was only a small number of cranes that benefited from this, along with other birds. Nevertheless, what then started as a small pigeon-feeding act has gradually grown into a mass feeding of the migratory cranes. A 1996 published article by the Oriental Bird Club noted:

“After the cranes complete their early morning feeding, they gather on the nearby sand dunes to preen a fascinating sight as the birds face the rising sun, their tie-like black chest feathers contrasting with the blue winter sky. A short while later, they depart in different directions in small family flocks. Once in the air, they immediately form a disciplined order led by the female, followed closely by up to two sub-adults and brought up by the male and continue calling. Their destination is a large area of barren land near Khichan, where feeding continues on seeds found in the soil. The cranes are not usually disturbed by the passing camel carts and people, but if a passer-by ventures too close, a single alarm call causes the whole flock to take wing” (Pfister 1996).

According to local sources, 500 tons of grains were fed to the cranes in the winter on a daily basis. While the Jain family that used to feed these birds left the village way back, they still continued the practice through intermediaries. As this practice gained popularity, different individuals and organizations have also started contributing to it. Currently, donations from local residents and visitors to protect and feed the cranes are managed by Kuraj Samrakshan Vikas Sansthan, Pakshi Chughra Ghar, Khichan, a society that was established to protect cranes in Khichan (Ilyashenko and Harris 2019). The Rajasthan

government has recently recognized this place as a tourist destination, and hundreds of people from across the world come to the village every winter.

Over the years, the people of Kichan and surrounding villages, along with their guest cranes, have profoundly influenced one another's lives. From August to December, the most awaited guests by the villagers, tourists, researchers, and photographers across the world reach Kichan, flying around 4000 kilometres. Travelling from Siberia, China, Mongolia, Ladakh, and the Tibetan Plateau, it passes through Afghanistan and Central Asia before halting at the Thar Desert of Rajasthan. The conservation of species in the region is said to be embedded in the religious, cultural and ethical beliefs of local people, as well as the longstanding attitude toward protection toward cranes (Gehlot et al. 2020). As for many people of the village, 'crane feeding' is a matter of their beliefs and traditions. They believe that feeding the migratory birds brings them luck and prosperity. For instance, Ratan Lal, a villager, who has long been feeding the cranes, said: "I do this work in the name of *Dharam* (virtue/moral duty). It brings me good luck. I am in good health because I do this good deed" (Tabarez 2020-2:07 mins, youtube video).

A famous folk song sung for generations in the village and across Rajasthan sheds light on how the cranes have engrossed their cultural imaginations. This folk song describes how a woman whose husband is a migrant labourer cried her pain to the Kurjan bird (Demoiselle

crane) and how the bird brought her lover home. The woman tells the crane: “Kurjan, you belong to my village and are my half-sister. Help me meet my husband”. A few lines of the folk song, as translated by Earth Touch News in their documentary about the crane, are given below:

*“I was awakened by a dream at midnight  
I share my feelings with you, Kurjan (The Demoiselle crane).  
Help me meet my husband  
please deliver the message to my beloved.  
Kurjan, you belong to my village  
you are my half-sister.  
On your wings, write my sadness  
on your beak, seven salutes.  
Deliver this message to my beloved, Kurjan”*

The story of the migratory demoiselle cranes and their host villagers adequately exemplifies how people’s association with birds are embedded in non-material aspects such as kindness, affection, compassion and culture. The long-running migrations of the birds did not only culturally influence the people around them but also changed the village landscape as a whole. The village that is mostly abandoned off-winter becomes alive and active during winter with the birds migrating and tourists, researchers, photographers and locals flooding. A similar example is the pigeon towers of Ahmedabad, *Chabutra or Chabutro*, a structure where the city’s past, and present, people and

birds congregate (Figure 2). *Chabutra* resemble the Romanian pigeon houses called dovecotes. Locals built these structures to replace trees that were cut down in the past so that they provide shade and shelter for the birds. Its open windows provide space for birds to build nests, eat and rest on hot sunny days, while the base serves as a gathering place for locals and plays host to children during the day (Mistry 2020). In the city landscapes, where trees are scarce, food and water for the birds are offered in *Chabutra*.



*Figure 2 Chabutra*  
Photo: <http://heritage.ahmedabadcity.gov.in>

The existence of 140-150 years old *Chabutra* across the old city of Ahmedabad is, thus, a way through which the city residents compensate for the lost ‘glorious green past’ where trees all over the city provided shelter, shade and food for both humans and animals alike. It remains an ideal example of how in urban spaces like that of

Ahmedabad, human-bird relations are strengthened by human kindness.

## 2.7 Summary

In this chapter, we explored how human-bird relations are mediated by culture, religion, beliefs of different kinds, affection and care. The chapter addressed the often-overlooked fact that human's association with avian species have varied and multi-layered dimensions beyond mere materiality and utilitarianism. We discussed different omens related to birds and argued that the existence and observance of bird omens challenge the anthropocentric portrayal of humans as at the centre of the environment and provide birds with an 'unintended agency'. The chapter also addressed how birds are viewed and valued in both Hinduism and Islam, along with what the Demoiselle Crane migrations to the Kichan village and *Chabutra* of Ahmedabad tell us about human affection towards their feathered friends.



### 3. Birdwatching: Some Historical Insights<sup>3</sup>

#### 3.1 Guns to Binoculars

From guns to binoculars and cameras to smartphones, the history of birdwatching is fascinating. Birdwatching was largely carried out as a hobby known as ‘collecting’ before the invention of binoculars, with shooting birds and collecting their eggs being a common practice. The practice of birdwatching is thought to have originated with the collection of eggs and skins. Until the 19th century, egg collecting was a popular pastime among bird lovers, and discussion on bird eggs was always a hot topic in ornithological journals (Brunner 2017). Salim Ali writes in his autobiography, “Most people who contributed to bird study in India were foreigners who had grown up in their home country with birdlore -- if only as ‘egg collecting school boys’ – before they came out to India” (Ali 1988). Many of them took sport-shooting and natural history as a serious pastime to collecting bird skins and eggs.

Guns played a significant role in the history of ornithology and birdwatching. The collection of eggs and birds for taxidermy was part of the shooting. This led to discoveries of rare birds (Moss 2004). Allan Octavian Hume, the founder of the Indian National Congress, also known as Pope of Indian Ornithology, along with his team, collected birds from all over the Indian subcontinent. The birdman of

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<sup>3</sup> A part of this chapter was published in <https://science.thewire.in/> by Aiyadurai and Patil (2022). Please see the reference section for more details.

India, Salim Ali's interest in birds began formally after shooting a bird and identifying it as Yellow-throated sparrow (*Gymnoris xanthocollis*). Salim Ali was a hunter himself who became known as the "Ecologist with a Gun" (Chengappa 2014)

### 3.2 Shooting to Watching

*'Seen with only the naked eye, they look like a bunch of light brown spots moving around on a dark brown field. With a pair of binoculars, or better, a spotting scope, they resolve into 50 or so discrete birds feeding in a muddy tidal zone.'* – Jeffrey (2004)

Karnicky Jeffrey writes about Red knots (*Calidris canutus*) and the significance of binoculars. They are now an inseparable part of birdwatchers. Talking about binoculars, Mark Cocker (2001) described it as an "object of desire in a long relationship with optical technology: an affair that's central to most birders' lives" (26)...and "definitely birder's best friend" (35). Manufactured initially for military surveillance, a breakthrough in binoculars came with the invention of the compact prismatic system, and the subsequent imposition of conservation laws replaced guns with binoculars.

In 1901, Kodak launched a "Box Brownie" costing one dollar that made cameras accessible to many. Since then, cameras have come a long way. Now companies like Sony, Canon, and Nikon have invented sophisticated digital cameras and lenses for wildlife photography. In 2020, Swarovski Optic developed a Digital guide connected to

personal devices like smartphones and tablets with a Merlin bird identification application. Birders these days use DSLRs to scan and click the birds and then zoom in on the images to identify them. Smartphones carry bird images, including the entire book of Grimmett et al. 2016. Sharing images of birds is much easier now with the availability of various social network sites (Facebook and Twitter). WhatsApp, the messaging app, is also used to send and receive messages quickly. Therefore, it is not surprising that bird watchers use these platforms in multiple ways.

In the 1970s, telephones and pagers too played an interesting role in birdwatching. When telephones were not affordable for everyone, people used telephones in cafes in the U.K., writes Stephen Moss (2004). Birdwatchers used the Telephone Tree Network to share information about new birds. Upon spotting a rare bird, given its vulnerability, it is possible to limit the spread of information pertaining to it. The invention of pagers led to the Bird Information Service (BIS) in the U.K. Furthermore, this service has adopted different ways of communication, like magazines, Short Message Services (SMS), and web pages. Technological innovations like telecommunication and the internet have made major changes in the communication system among the birdwatching community.



### 3.3 Birdwatching in India

Salim Ali, the father of Indian Ornithology, begins his autobiography 'The Fall of a Sparrow' (1988) by telling us how he got interested in watching birds. He says, "I contracted this germ of ornithology at a time when the disease was practically unknown among the Indians" (vii). He grew up during a period when birdwatching was unheard of in India. If Salim Ali was alive today, he would not have believed that a practice, which he called a 'cult', has grown to be one of the greatest hobbies and professions among the Indian population. In different parts of the country, individuals and organizations conduct regular birding events. Early contributions to bird study in India were made by the East India Company and 'outstanding naturalists' Babur and Jahangir.

Jahangir's memoirs, *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri* (1909), contained accurate observations of birds and other animals, along with their paintings. In one such instance, Jahangir recounts how his curiosity over the Common pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) led him to breed the species to produce eggs and then hatch them under chickens (p.134). Narrations about his encounters with other birds, like the Common grey partridge, Black partridge, Impeyan pheasant, Demoiselle crane, Sarus crane, and Red jungle fowl, among others, appear in his memoir. One such instance is noted below<sup>4</sup>:

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<sup>4</sup> Translated by Alexander Rogers

“On the 20th I marched to the halting place of Deogaon; I hunted along the road for a distance of 3 kos. I stayed at this place for two days, and at the end of the day went out to hunt. At this stage a strange affair was witnessed. Before the royal standards arrived at this halting-place, an eunuch went to the bank of a large tank there is in the village, and caught two young saras, which are a kind of crane; when the saras heard the cries of these young ones, they without control threw themselves upon them, and suspecting that they had had no food, each of the two saras placed food in the mouths of the young ones, and made much lamentation” (Jahangir 1909, 343).

The birds in the Indian Sub-continent were of high interest to the British ornithologists. In fact, it was a British surgeon-major named Thomas Jerdon who, to our knowledge, published the first book on Indian birds titled “Birds of India” in 1862. The book contained detailed descriptions and paintings of various birds. Having lived for around a quarter of a century in India, he was “a resident and a traveller” who observed and examined the fauna, especially birds across the country. Collecting and sharing bird specimens, observing birds in their natural and cultivated habitats and shooting them down were more or less a hobby among the British ornithologists in India. Frank Finn, an English ornithologist, for example, used to keep different species of birds together in an aviary and observe their behaviour under different circumstances. In his 1897 article for the Indian Journal of The Asiatic Society of Bengal, he describes how he observed caged birds. Among his experiments, he tried feeding butterflies to various bird species caged together to see how they responded. He housed three Red-whiskered bulbuls (*Pycnonotus*

*jocosus*) and two Red-billed leiothrixes (*Leiothrix lutea*) each in an aviary in one of his experiments.

A.O Hume is another good example to illustrate British Ornithologists' interest in Indian birds. His keenness for observing birds and collecting their specimens from different parts of British India was remarkable. He used to observe birds, shoot them, and take testimonies from the local residents on the availability of birds. Some excerpts from his 1873 published article *Contributions to the Ornithology of India, Sindh*, would be helpful in this regard:

“Went down again to the fish auction. Saw as before, hundreds of the large gull which I take to be borealis and shot 14. This was almost the only gull I saw there, except two argentatus, distinguishable at once by their paler hue. After breakfast went across the harbour to Munora, and during the day shot about the harbour. Of a small slender long-gonys billed, very rosy breasted gull, without any blackish patch near the ears, which I take to be *Gelastes Lambrusckini*, Bon., I observed innumerable birds and shot some 16” (128).

Another important British name in the history of birdwatching in India is R.S.P. Bates, whose contributions to Indian ornithology and popularising bird photography are noteworthy. Especially enamoured with Kashmir, he had an unquenchable passion for India and its countryside and birds. His popular series, namely ‘Birds nesting with a Camera’, published in six parts, popularized and promoted the art and science of bird photography in India (*JBNHS* 2016). Likewise, his 1931 published ‘Bird Life in India’ contained photographs and descriptions of around 62 bird species. A neglected art, bird photography was introduced and popularized by Bates through his

works, opening up new perspectives and possibilities. Other prominent English names in the history of birdwatching in India are field marshal Auchinleck who was nicknamed ‘The Auk’ for his enthusiasm for birdwatching, and General Bill Willimas (Pervez 2006), among others.

### **3.4 Summary**

In this chapter, we briefly addressed the history of birdwatching with particular reference to India. The practice of birdwatching evolved from shooting birds to observing them for research and leisure through different means. Bringing about examples of different British ornithologists, we shed light on how birdwatching was carried out in British colonial India. The contributions of such birdwatchers to Indian ornithology were also briefly discussed. In addition, we also discussed Jahangir, the Mughal emperor’s encounters with different species of Birds. An extension of this study could aid in further explorations in this area.



## 4. Who are Birdwatchers?

*“Nearly everyone enjoys birds: the beauty of their forms and colouring, the vivacity of their movements, the buoyancy of their flight and the sweetness of their song. It is precisely on this account that as a pursuit for the out-of-doors, bird watching stands in a class by itself. Its strong point is that it can be indulged in with pleasure and profit not only by the man who studies birds scientifically but also by one possessing no specialized knowledge”*

*- Salim Ali (1996:331)*

### 4.1 Introduction

Birdwatching, as discussed in earlier chapters, has become a hobby and also a profession that has been taken up by many around the world. Over time, from shooting to observing, it has undergone multiple changes. Birdwatching as a practice and its various facets, such as economy, history, and politics, are well addressed in the literature (e.g., Singleton and Gilpin 1979; Gibbons and Strom 1988; Sekercioglu 2002; Moss 2004; Connel 2009; Schaffner 2011). Despite this plentifulness, ‘birdwatcher’, as a subject, remains largely overlooked, especially in the Indian context. This chapter is an attempt to contribute to bridging this gap by exploring how Indian

birdwatchers involve in the process of birdwatching and the multiple meanings they ascribe to it. We also explore how variables such as age, gender and education are correlated to the practice of birdwatching in India. The chapter draws from an extensive online survey conducted among birdwatchers and telephonic interviews (Please see the methodology chapter).

A birdwatcher, the Cambridge Dictionary defines, is “someone who studies birds in their natural environment as a hobby”. Different scholars have classified birdwatchers into different categories. Mcfarlane (1994), in a study he conducted in Alberta, Canada, for example, has classified birders into four, i.e., casual, novice, intermediate, and advanced, based on their motivations like appreciation, achievement, affiliation, and conservation. Kellert (1985) classifies birders in the U.S. as “casual” and “committed”, considering the number of bird species one was able to identify. Those who reported being able to identify more than 40 bird species were classified as committed birdwatchers, while the rest were classified as casual birdwatchers. According to him, “Not only is species identification central to the ability to birdwatch but, more importantly, it represents to most active birders a fundamental identity-confirming characteristic” (347). Twitchers are a new category being discussed in both the West and Asia. They make trips to far-flung destinations in search of a single bird (Urfi 2012).

Classification of birdwatchers in India can be found in Stig Toft Madsen's study, a scholar at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (University of Copenhagen). In his unpublished work 'Birdwatching in and around India', Madsen classifies the birdwatchers in the country based on location (compound ornithology), seasonality (*jheel* birding), and distance travelled (safari ornithology). Madsen describes Indian and South Asian campuses as gardened forests with abundant birdlife, butterflies, and snakes since these campuses are fenced and have high biomass. These campuses, according to him, serve as a place of refuge for birds and animals<sup>5</sup>.



*Figure 3 Birdwatchers at Thol sanctuary, Gujarat  
(Photo: Ambika Aiyadurai)*

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<sup>5</sup> IISC, IIMA, and IIT Chennai, to name a few, have rich birdlife as well as scholars who have published books, articles, and checklists about birds.

We conducted an online survey and telephonic interviews with birdwatchers from different cities in the country to understand how the practice of birdwatching is conceived and carried by the current day birdwatchers in India. For this purpose, we conducted 450 online surveys and 11 telephonic interviews with the birdwatchers. The surveys and interviews have revealed a great deal of information about birdwatchers from different cities in India. We also joined field trips to study the social profile of the birdwatchers (Figure 3). In the passages to follow, we will discuss how the birdwatchers conceived the practice of birdwatching and what factors prompted them to be involved in the same. Additionally, we will examine how social variables such as age, gender, and education affect birdwatching.

## **4.2 Social Profile of Birdwatchers**

The male versus female ratio in the responses we received appears to imply that birdwatching in Indian cities is gendered. Male birdwatchers dominated the survey consisting of around 80% of total participants, while females accounted only for 20%. The majority of them were based in urban areas, out of which 56% of them hailed from the capital cities of Mumbai, Delhi & National Capital Region, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Chennai, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad-Gandhinagar, Bhopal, Dehradun, Panaji, Gangtok, Guwahati, Lucknow, and Raipur. About 15% belonged to non-metropolitan cities such as Pune, Visakhapatnam, Surat, Vadodara, Kanpur, Pondicherry etc. In



addition, 29% of respondents hailed from smaller towns in different states across India.

Nearly 34% of respondents were over 45 years old, whereas 19% were under 25 years old. Among the 450 respondents, 36% had a bachelor's degree, and 44% had a master's degree. Respondents represented a variety of professions, including students, job aspirants, naturalists, scientists, doctors, professors, bankers, lawyers, service members from both government and non-government sectors, consultants, working professionals from I.T. and other corporate firms and self-employed. Birdwatchers with intermediate experience accounted for 45% of the respondents, whereas amateurs represented 29% (Figure 4).

Among all age groups, the largest number of respondents fell into the category of birdwatcher with intermediate experience, followed by the category of amateur birdwatchers. It is also interesting to note that the greatest number of people with intermediate experience in birdwatching and amateur birdwatchers belonged to the age group >45, followed by 36-45, 26-35 and <25 (Figure 5). It suggests that there is a steady progression of experience with regard to birdwatching with increasing age. Beginner-level birdwatchers, on the other hand, belonged equally to the age groups of <25 and 36-45. The age groups of 26-35 and >45 were reported to have the greatest number of 'expert birdwatchers', followed by 36-45. Expert bird watchers were equally represented in the age groups of 26-35 and >45, while, though, in

fewer numbers, bird watchers who identified as ornithologists mostly belonged to the age group of 36-45. With higher education levels, respondents tend to identify themselves with greater experience. However, such a trend cannot be seen in “expert birdwatcher” or “ornithologist”.

73% of the respondents did not have any formal training in birdwatching. They were mostly self-taught through field guides, the internet and birding trips, and in a few cases, they were mentored by another expert. The rest of the respondents received professional training from one of the following sources: 1) curriculum requirements and 2) workshop/ certificate courses from environmental institutions. Out of the 27% remaining respondents, 85% attended certificate courses or workshops. Some of the organizers of these courses are GEER Foundation, BNHS, WWF etc.

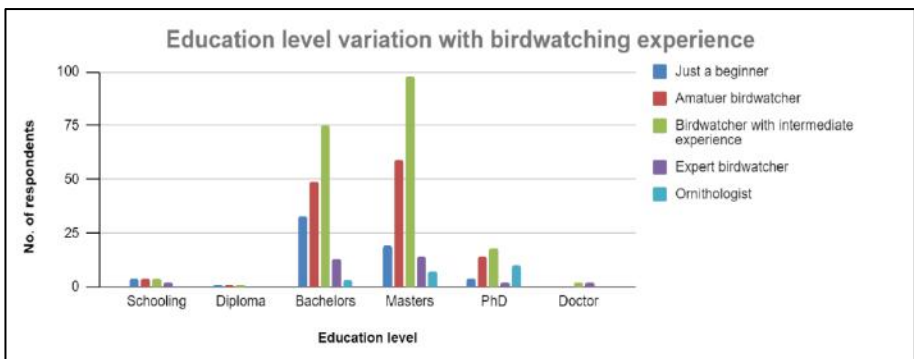


Figure 4 Education level variation with birdwatching experience

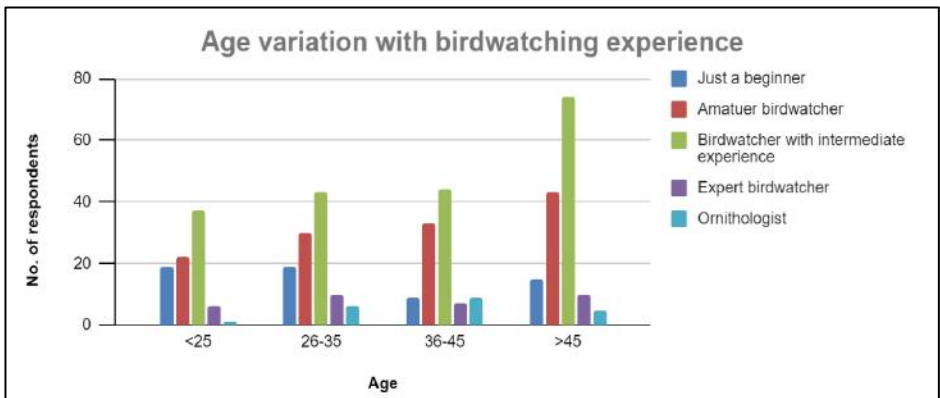


Figure 5 Age variation with birdwatching experience

### 4.3 Birdwatching: Why, Where and How?

For different birdwatchers, the practice of birdwatching serves different purposes. Our investigation into the motivations for birdwatching revealed multiple reasons, most of which are emotionally driven. The “appearance”, “behaviour”, and “sound” of the birds fascinate most of the birdwatchers we surveyed and interviewed. The participants find these attributes as “industrious”, “magical”, and “musical”, thereby giving them “pleasure”, “peace”, and “enhanced mood”. A birdwatcher from Ahmedabad noted: *“it (birdwatching) brings me closer to nature, helps me relax, and allows me to create lasting memories with a camera”*. An I.T. employee from Bangalore, who goes birdwatching every week, had a similar opinion: *“of course, I love birdwatching, there are no particular reasons, but I get immense happiness, get a wider perspective towards life, takes me to places normally not visited”*. “Learning” was another aspect

highlighted by the birdwatchers. Every time one goes birdwatching, alone or in a group, many of them note it endeavours opportunities to learn something new; it could be about a bird, its behaviour, habitat and surroundings. Besides mentioning that it is a stress-relieving activity, some of them even stated it is helping them unearth “wider perspectives towards life”. The birding trips give them a chance to break free from their monotonous lives, as well as the opportunity to experience new places and meet like-minded people. Some other respondents mentioned that it allows them to sharpen their skills such as listening, observing and visual documentation, along with how long birdwatching walks help them to remain fit.

Respondents maintained that their keenness for watching birds in their childhood is what prompted them to become the birdwatchers they are today. Books on birds, such as those of Salim Ali and television shows featuring birds also sparked their interest. Many respondents cited a passion for wildlife photography as their main motivations for becoming birdwatchers. Some respondents, on the other hand, mentioned that their wildlife adventures piqued their interest in birdwatching. Participants who studied wildlife sciences or related courses such as environmental sciences developed an interest through coursework, guided fieldwork, and other extracurricular activities.

The emergence of birding clubs and e-birding platforms and the presence of birds in their backyards made some interested, while others were inspired by their teachers and peers. Of all the

respondents, 276 (64%) of the respondents were also able to mention the first bird they had observed at first. In 47.8% of cases, birds were first observed near their homes. Among them are the House Crow (*Corvus splendens*), Common myna (*Acridotheres tristis*), Asian koel (*Eudynamys scolopaceus*), Blue rock-pigeon (*Columba livia*), several species of kingfisher, Cormorant and local species of duck, House sparrow, Green bee-eaters, Rufous treepie, Red-vented bulbul, Cattle egrets, and so on. Here's how a few of the respondents remembered their first encounters with birds:

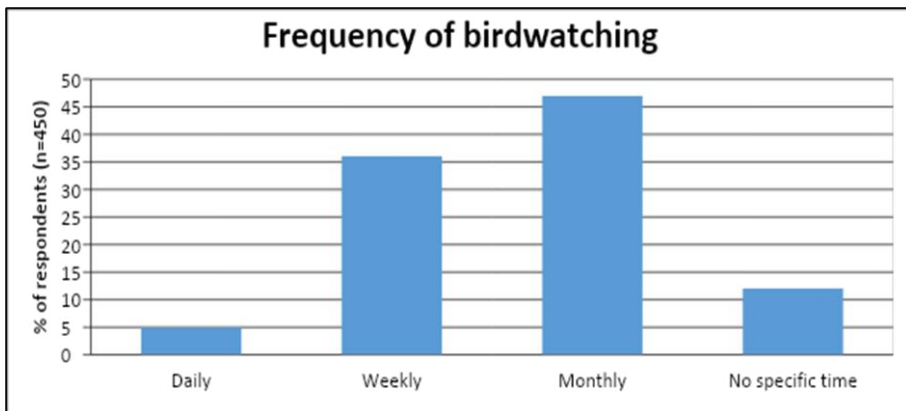
*“As I was born in a village in Kerala, I had several opportunities of seeing a lot of birds in and around our house and on the way to school. But as a “birdwatcher”, I remember seeing a colourful bird and identifying it as Indian Pitta in 1983. This sight actually inculcated a lot of interest in me in birds”.*

*“A huge group of Cormorants. There was a lone Egret sitting in their midst, as though it was conducting a musical class and Cormorants are his students!!”*

*“I was always aware of them. Sparrows used to build their nests on the fan. I used to watch them regularly.”*

*“A few birds I saw on the calendar, and when I sighted them in real, I got tremendous joy. It was Fantail and Black-winged stilt”.*

Coming to the frequency of birdwatching, among the respondents, 47% go birdwatching on a monthly basis, whereas 36% go on a weekly basis. Five per cent of the respondents reported that they observe birds almost daily and do not need to go on specific birding trips (Figure 6). They observe birds while at work, at home or on casual walks. The rest of the respondents didn't specify a timeframe. Their social or commercial commitments, health, and availability of time determine when, where and how they observe birds. A little less than 20% of respondents indicated that they prefer to go birding alone, and almost 40% preferred to go in small (2-3) to medium (4-7) groups. Nearly 40% of the respondents said they do not have such preferences, and sometimes they go in groups, and sometimes they go alone.



*Figure 6 Frequency of birdwatching*

Most of the respondents have visited birdwatching hotspots in India that are far from their hometowns or workplace. These places

mentioned are Uttarakhand (Pangot, Sattal, Chopta, Binsar etc.), Arunachal Pradesh (Eaglenest WLS, Walong, Mishmi Hills, Pakke TR etc.), Assam (Manas, Kaziranga), Gujarat (Little Rann of Kutchh), several wetlands (Point Calimere, Pulikat, Charotar etc.) and other national parks. These trips cost anywhere from INR 40000 to INR 2 lakhs. Few respondents had travelled abroad for birding or wildlife-related purposes to places like Kenya, Borneo, Papua New Guinea, Mexico, etc. 48% of the respondents mentioned that they hire guides whenever they go birdwatching, while 52% do not hire any guides.

About 60% of the respondents are involved in birding groups, whether they are virtual or physical (clubs and societies). These groups comprise ebird, Facebook, and WhatsApp, through which members get access to a wide range of information and can post photographs and videos about birds. Physical groups include various local formal groups in the respondents' hometown or district; It could be a district chapter or a state chapter of a larger birding group. The groups that have been enlisted by the respondents are situated in Gujarat, Delhi, West Bengal, Tamil Nādu, Kerala, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand etc. Some of the respondents are also members of pan-India wildlife-based NGOs such as BNHS (Bombay Natural History Society), WWF (World Wildlife Fund) etc.

Approximately 25% of respondents mentioned that they carry a list of specific birds they wish to see during birding trips and that they have specific birds as targets during these trips (Figure 7). Among 49% of

those surveyed, they do it occasionally, but not every time. Rest confirmed that they do not carry any list anywhere. Asking about favourite birdwatching destinations, 79% of the respondents mentioned their favourite places, with the majority being found in Uttarakhand Himalayas, Arunachal Pradesh, Western Ghats, Gujarat, Rajasthan and various national parks (Figure 9). A local forest or wetland near their home was mentioned as their favourite place by 11% of the respondents. Rest maintained that it is difficult to pick only one destination as a favourite, and the right observation can make any location a good place for birdwatching.

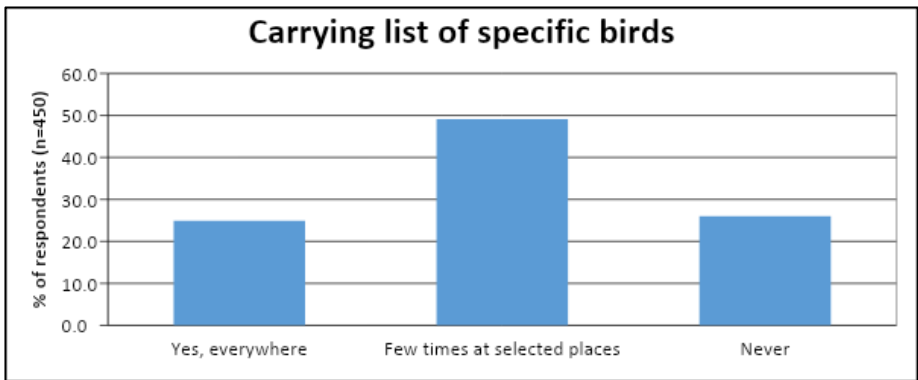
Coming to the favourite birds of the birdwatchers, 6% of the respondents mentioned that all birds are their favourite. And 13% of respondents thought it is difficult to select a favourite species out of many. The rest of the respondents showed preferences for certain bird species that they thought were their favourites. This included birds of prey (Black baza, different Owl and Eagle species, Osprey, Peregrine falcon, Collared falconet, Black-shouldered kite), storks and cranes (Black-necked stork, Woolly-necked stork, Sarus crane etc.), aquatic avifauna (different Wader species, Bronze-winged Jacana, Flamingo and Pelicans and different Kingfisher species etc.), large charismatic birds (different Hornbill species and Great Indian bustard), colourful varieties (Fire-tailed Sunbird, Fire-tailed Myzornis, Himalayan Monal, Indian pitta, Koklass pheasant, Malabar trogon, Ward's



Trogon, Tragopans, Long-tailed broadbill etc.) and common birds (Black drongo, House sparrow, Indian roller, Magpie robin, Peafowl).

While 14% of the respondents stated they do not use any particular field guides for birdwatching, the remaining said they use guides of different kinds. Book of Indian Birds (1941) by Salim Ali, Birds of the Indian Subcontinent (1998) by Carol Inskipp, Richard Grimmet, and Tim Inskipp, to Birds of India (2017) by Bikram Grewal and Garima Bhatia are just a few of the guides used by birdwatchers. Some also use guides available in local languages.

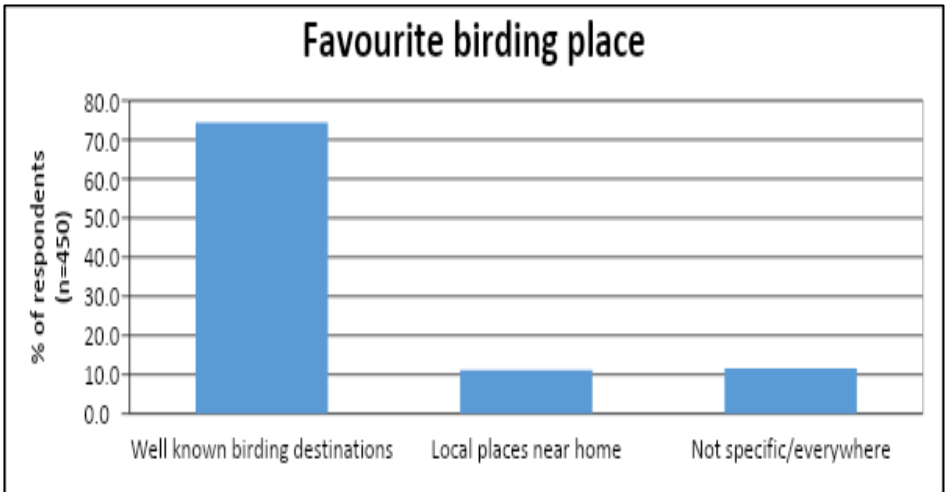
Almost all the respondents were found to be using binoculars for watching birds. Seventy-nine per cent of the respondents use sophisticated DSLR cameras and lenses, with most of them manufactured by Canon, Nikon, and Sony. There were 12% of respondents who did not reveal the camera or lens they use, and 9% acknowledged that they do not use a camera. 37% of the respondents stated that they always update their photos on social media, while 47% stated that they do it sometimes and not every time they come back from a birding trip. Rest said that they never upload any photo to any social media or website.



*Figure 7 Whether the birdwatcher carries a list of birds*

Around 59% of those surveyed said they had taken part in a bird count or census. 54% said they had never participated in a bird race, and 13% said they did not know what a bird race was. 33% have taken part in bird races in cities such as Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Guwahati, Lucknow, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Jodhpur, Coimbatore, Dehradun, Goa, Pune, Nagpur, Chandigarh, and Thiruvananthapuram.

When asked about ethical birdwatching, the responses were fairly consistent, centred on respecting the bird's autonomy and taking care of the bird's well-being. The respondents considered non-disturbance of the bird and its habitat, not divulging the sites of endangered birds, no use of flashlights while doing photography, call playback or other baits, no photography of nesting, maintaining a safe distance from the bird and not capturing, handling, or harming the bird as parameters for ethical birdwatching



*Figure 8 Favourite birding place*

#### **4.4 Summary**

In this chapter, we looked at various aspects of birdwatching in India, from how birdwatchers across the country carry out and perceive birdwatching to what piqued their interest in becoming birdwatchers. We found that most birdwatchers date their roots back to their childhood when they used to observe birds in their natural surroundings. Many were influenced by the books they read and television shows they watched during their childhood. This presumably implies that early observations and exposure may have an impact on an individual's decision to take up birdwatching as a long-term hobby. We were also able to understand that, from a birdwatcher's perspective, the practice of birdwatching serves more

emotional purposes than merely being a hobby. In addition to bringing peace to their minds, birdwatching is found to develop their listening and observational skills. We also explored how the variables of age and education are related to birdwatching in India. It was found that with higher education levels, respondents tend to identify themselves with greater experience.



## **5. Concluding remarks**

The purpose of this study was multifarious. It intended to bring about an interdisciplinary understanding of human-bird relations, keeping birdwatching at the centre of analysis. In doing so, ranging from the cultural mediation of human-bird relations to birdwatching as means through which human-bird relations are shaped, we discussed different facets of human-bird relations. Chapter. 2 in this report was an attempt to shed light on the multiple ‘cultural ways’ through which humans and birds are connected to each other. Challenging the anthropocentric notion that human-bird relations are merely material and utilitarian, we provided examples of how there can be the other ways. It was highlighted that humans drawing omens from birds can be seen as an indication of enabled bird agency. In chapter. 3, we offered some insights into the historical development of birdwatching. In addition to describing the evolution of birdwatching, we also provided information on birdwatching in colonial India. Based on an extensive survey and interviews in chapter.4, we highlighted different aspects of birdwatching in India, including the social profile of birdwatchers, the factors that prompted individuals to become birdwatchers and the different ways through which birdwatching is carried out.

Our study, we believe, through its interdisciplinary approach, has contributed to the limited body of literature addressing human-bird relations in India. The fields to which this study is relevant may include anthropology, history, human-animal studies and ethno-

ornithology. We expect our work to initiate and encourage scholarly discourses on human-bird relations among social science and humanities scholars in India and beyond. In particular, the field of ethno-ornithology, which includes the “portrayals of birds through art, patterns of utilization, language, life from creation to death, bearers of messages and interactions in everyday life” (Tidemann and Gosler 2010: 5), remains largely unexplored and limited to a few studies (e.g., Jha and Jha 2012; Agnihotri and Si 2012; Pande 2014; Kumar 2019) in the context of India. With a plethora of diverse cultures and traditions, ethno-ornithology has a great scope in India. Along similar lines, studies on birdwatching and birdwatchers, in India, from a social science standpoint, are limited to a few works (e.g., Urfi 2012; Mishra 2017). The political, anthropological and gender dimensions of the growing practice of birdwatching in India need to be critically explored. We hope our study serves as an important contribution to fuelling further studies in this field.



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