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Birds, Bees And Squirrels

Free India's mantris and santris have lived amid abundant greenery. But they haven't ever planted a single tree.



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Indians have hardly any curiosity about the external world. Perhaps they are more focused on the interior self and future salvation. To them all birds are generally chhiris. Their specific knowledge is limited to crows, kites



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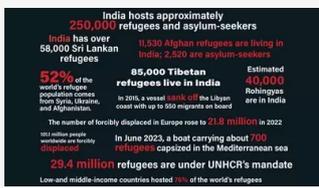
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Introduction City Of Refugees



There is an old city where a

not promoted among children in school or homes.

Long years ago, my reading passion took me to a strange book —Birds in a Delhi Garden. High commissioner Malcolm Macdonald had spent delightful mornings and afternoons sitting in his Lutyen's bungalow, observing the rich variety of Indian birds. I was fascinated by his account.

Driving around New Delhi as a young officer, I looked with envy at the white-colonnaded bungalows. Set well back from quiet roads, they were full of mysterious possibilities. And one day, I was offered one to live in. My career achievement has not been the CEC's job, but the grace and favour of a Delhi garden house. Delhi's finest imli avenue, sadly diminishing now, led to a white gate set between dark tree shades. A mound hid the house from curious eyes. On it a giant neem tree and two of the tallest cacti in Delhi. God bless the British superintendent of gardens who had obviously planted each house with great care. Three groves of bamboo that today shelter raucous bunches of grey partridges, a jamun tree, a date palm, Kasauli pine, a mighty simal, amaltas, jacaranda, queen of the forest, kichtnar and, of course, the beautiful but unregarded kikar. A kadam shaded the back veranda, ficus and bottlebrush dotted spacious lawns.

Human beings are essentially involved in rites of passage. There is no permanent basera. We enjoy what is given for a while and move on. The only memory we leave is a tree. My passion and joy has been to plant citrus, peepal, simal, kichtnar and fine Madhya Pradesh teaks—today 25-foot tall. My grandfather used to say someone plants the mangoes, others eat them. Free India's mantris and santris have had the privilege of living in these houses for 52 years. It is my belief that neither species can be accused of having ever planted a tree. So, the British trees are dying after 80 years, and the India Gate lawns have missing jamuns, like an old man slowly dropping teeth. They are not being replaced. The odd pathetic attempt fail because the plants are neither pruned nor guarded nor cared for.

What of the birds? The first thing we did was to set a bird bath. It has been my joy to fill it twice a day. One had just to sit and watch the mynas, parrots, bulbuls and crows come for a drink and bath. In coldest winter, the mynas love to stand in the shallow pool, flutter their wings and splash about. They are quite immodest and not at all embarrassed by an observer. Often, I sat like a voyeur on a Goa beach.

India is bird-friendly, and the variety is vast. I have seen flights of rare green pigeons and hornbills come by. I sit quietly and



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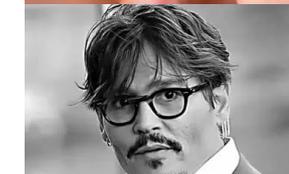


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on the kadam tree, the birds coming down to pick up little sticks and then fluttering up like helicopters. The green parrots zooming around cutting up all the guava fruit. It was all another world, so far removed from the movers and shakers of Delhi. Surprisingly, the frequent crises in government did not at all upset the birds. Even when a government was falling, the peacocks came in stately procession for their morning drink, and the pigeons continued their public lovemaking. I was, therefore, horrified when my friend Ram Jethmalani once suggested that this green Delhi be bulldozed, to make way for flats. Ram lives in a house nearby. I cannot believe that a lawyer's soul can remain so unaffected by the kudrat ka vatavaran all around him.

The little squirrels have been a joy. Unlike the fat American squirrels, the Indians are compact, lithe, athletes. They race around climbing trees, walls, clotheslines, anything, and carrying on a perpetual tik-tik dialogue. I once saw one of them go up to the top of a bottlebrush, and then make the hugest jump to the ledge of the house. He was not afraid, and I do believe, he still holds the world record for squirrels. I had seen Bob Beamon make the astounding long jump at the Mexico Olympics in 1968. I believe my squirrel did better. I wish Kalmadi's Federation, and Uma Bharati's ministry, would for once give a well-deserved Arjuna Award.

One strange memory remains. In my early days in the house, going out for a morning walk, I found a vulture that had been hit by a car. With an injury in one wing, he could not fly. He was going to die, or be torn to bits by street dogs. I asked the guard to open the gate and slowly shooed him into the house. He sat quietly in a corner under a bush, injured and unhappy. My drivers and guards were horrified. A vulture is an ill omen. It brings death. They tried persuading me and my family. We could not agree. He stayed a few weeks. My girls used to take him bread and milk. God's miracle. One day I found him sitting on top of the cactus. He was obviously so much better and healed. I took his photographs and then one day he flew away to a far-off land, as we all must.

There is a time to come and a time to go. We must depart with joy because the past is a memory and the future, New Hope. I will miss the squirrels, the birds and bees and the trees. But will they miss me? I think they have a greater understanding of the universe, and a deeper sense of non-attachment. But maybe they too carry a memory and, therefore, heartache.



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