

Saras Aircraft Takes Wings : Sarus Crane on Road to Extinction

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On 28 May 2004, print and electronic media were flush with news of the maiden test flight of India's first indigenous civil aircraft. Many reports emphasised with a certain admiration that the aircraft is named after our Sarus crane (Sketch 1). Sadly, that is a crude paradox though, because not many Indians are aware that the beautiful and graceful Sarus crane is in fact on the fast track to extinction. The irony of this kind of recognition bestowed on the Sarus in the instant case, is prosaically summed up by Bill Canning who once stated that, "Animals are continually being compared to man in favourable terms. This is supposed to be same great compliment. Yet surely to these extraordinary creatures there can be nothing more demeaning". At the face of it, this may appear a harsh indictment of man's insensitivity to the animal kingdom but there are times when it is patently justified.

In the early decades of the 20th Century, India was home to the largest population of Sarus crane in the world. They numbered in thousands and were seen throughout the sub-continent except south of the Godavari. So it is worrisome, that the latest census by the Wildlife Institute of India should show a countrywide count of 2468 birds only. Of this more than 35 per cent Sarus are today concentrated and dependent upon the marshes in Uttar Pradesh's Etawah and Mainpuri districts alone. By a strange paradox, the World Bank chose to fund a wasteland reclamation project just in these two districts which entails specifically to drain out the marshes, the essential lifeline habitat of the Sarus.

It is generally accepted that the Himalayan Mountain Quail was last seen in 1876. Regretably, bird photography was not in vogue in those times and so generations of Indians since, have known this attractive bird only through some excellent paintings which have survived. And for the scientists, there are a few

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preserved skins in museums across continents. Closer to our times, the Pink-headed duck was never sighted after 1935. Although the likes of EHN Lowther and Colonel RSP Bates had pioneered bird photography in India by then but this very handsome bird was perhaps never photographed. The pink of its head and neck set up a dazzling contrast with the rich dark-brown plumage of the rest of its body. Both birds were endemic to India alone. Their extinction is an irrevocable heritage loss for the world at large and India especially.



Sketch 1

(Source : Salim Ali, *The Book of Indian Birds*, 1943, 3rd Edition, p. 345.)

Luckily there have not been any more bird extinctions since, though over 100 species of India's birds have reached a critical stage in survival. Fortunately, many of these birds have caught the popular imagination of most Indians and with persuasive motivation they might rally to help create favourable conditions for the survival of these species into the future. The Sarus among all these species perhaps has the most deep rooted mythical appeal with the larger cross section of rural and urban Indians. Not just because at 1.50 to 1.75 metre it is tallest of all the 15 species of cranes in the world; nor because it is the tallest of all species of birds in India; nor because it is the tallest flying bird in the world; neither because the Sarus stands shoulder to shoulder with an average Indian! Rather, because the Sarus is perceived by most Indians as the living legend of conjugal fidelity and that they pair for life, invariably transcending the marital vow, "till death do us part". This belief of immutable bonding by Sarus pairs has made the bird universally worshipful among all tribals and non-tribals of India from as far back as recorded history.

The most intimate life history of the Sarus crane in the field was painstakingly observed, collated and penned with great sensitivity, for the first time, by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir and it pre-dates the first book on Indian Birds by about 250 years. The text of the latest *Jahangirnama* (translated, edited and annotated by Wheeler M Thackston, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, 1999) for the period March 1616 to March 1617 reveals the first ever recorded description of the Sarus:

"The Sarus is a bird something like a crane, but it is larger than a crane by a ratio of ten to twelve and has no feathers on its head, just skin stretched over bone. For a distance of about six fingers behind the eyes and down the neck it is red. Mostly they live in pairs in the wilderness though occasionally they can be seen in flocks..."

The Emperor then gives a most incisive account of the bonding for life of the Sarus crane thus:

"Many strange and wonderful tales have been heard concerning the affection and attachment Saruses have for their mates. Since they have been heard so often and are so strange,

they are worth recording...A pair of Saruses were spotted besides the tank in the Pargana of Dhond. One of my musketeers shot one of them, cut its head off and cleaned it...The mate kept circling around that spot, crying out and lamenting. My heart ached over its distress but there was nothing I could do but regret... We chanced to pass by there again twenty five days later. I asked the inhabitants what had happened to the Sarus. They said it had died within two days but its bones and feathers were still there. I went to the spot myself and found the remains just as they had said".

And on another occasion, Jahangir picked up a grieving, widowed Sarus and mentions, "when I examined it, there were absolutely no feathers on its breast or belly, Its flesh and skin were falling away and it was infected...it was just a handful of feathers and a few bones." The account concludes with this inimitable verse :

My body melted away in heart-rending separation.

My soul searing sigh burns like a candle.

My day of gaily has turned as black as the night or grief.

Separation from you has made me like this.

In the Indian mindset, the Sarus crane remains the symbol of the eternal on Earth. It predates the classics such as the Persian *Laila* and *Majnu* and the Shakespearian *Romeo* and *Juliet*. One has to witness the tenderness, the grace, the joy and love's ecstasy of the Sarus crane's yearly mating dance, to understand the quality of bonding which for them extends even beyond life-on-earth.

And yet the Sarus crane today figures in the *Red Data Book: Species of Indian Birds* whose future is gravely threatened. It is not as though Indians have become insensitive to the mystique and the romance of the legend of Sarus crane, handed down mostly orally, over at least five millennium to be sure, but that we are unmindful of the forces which result in the destruction of the habitat of the Sarus. The Sarus crane cannot survive without marshes or wetlands which are literally being drained out, land filled, bull dozed and ploughed.

The founding fathers of the Constitution of India had clearly visualised that the State and the Nation as a whole shall jointly protect and care for its wildlife and their habitats. For the Directive Principles of State Policy under Article 48 A enjoin upon the "State to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard forests and wildlife". Article 51 A which lays down the Fundamental Duties of a citizen states in clause (G) – "It shall be the duty of every citizen to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures". In real terms, this natural environment comprising forests, tiger reserves, national parks, marshes, wetlands and so on today amounts to less than five per cent of India's landmass only. Let us not grudge this miniscule space left to our wildlife and instead apply our minds to use the other 95 per cent of land more scientifically and productively to provide better quality of life to all the Indians. As for "compassion for living creatures", for a start let us protect all marshes and wetlands in India because they are the home of Sarus crane. Lastly, as the poet once said :

What would the world be once bereft,

Of wet and wilderness? Let them be left.

O, let them be left, wilderness and wet,

Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

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