

## **M Krishnan- The Versatile Naturalist**

### A VERSATILE NATURALIST

"The Statesman", the Calcutta- based newspaper in its Sunday edition dt.12th April 1996, added a small inclusion in Italics, below the 'Country Notebook' column which read like this: "This is the last instalment of "Country Note book by M.Krishnan. A weekly feature by PJO Taylor will appear from next". For the casual reader it would appear like one of those changes that happen regularly with newspaper columns. The Country Notebook was not any other newspaper column; it was the longest personal column ever to have been written in the history of Indian Journalism and possibly in the history of the Press itself. From 1950 this fortnightly column appeared without a single break and it was written by M. Krishnan, the great and versatile naturalist from Madras. He had passed away on 18th Feb, 1996. M. Krishnan was many things at the same time; an ecologist, a great photographer, a skilled artist, a nature chronicler par excellence, a conservationist and much more. He had a deep and abiding interest in Tamil Literature. Those who are familiar with Krishnan's work know that he was truly a colossus. Philip Crosland, who had introduced Krishnan to this 'Country Notebook' column, when he was editing the Sunday Statesman's magazine section in the early forties, wrote. "Krishnan wrote splendid English: not a word ever had to be changed in any of his articles. His achievements as a photographer hardly needed enlarging upon. He was a fine artist too, in a number of media – colour wash, scraper board, pen & ink and line drawings."

The 'Country Notebook' is just a convenient entry point to get into the many worlds of M.Krishnan. For it surely tells us how erudite he must have been to write continuously for 46 years on India's wilderness and natural history. This rare erudition, singular insight and first hand knowledge was the result of his innumerable field trips to the various forests of this sub-continent. It was the result of intimate observations, meticulous field notes, photo-documentation supplementing observations, sound scientific knowledge and constant reading. Above all Krishnan was passionate about India's natural regions and countryside. He felt so intensely about them, that he was rightly called an 'ecological patriot.' The column that appeared on Feb 18, 1996, the day he died, was providentially titled "Exclusively Indian" and in it he wrote, "The identity of a country depended not so much on its mutable human culture as on its geomorphology, flora and fauna, its natural basis." Krishnan was eager all his life to share with his readers the wonders of our woods. To have been able to tell something worthwhile for four and a half decades and engage the reader ably testifies the scholastic grasp the author must have had on the subject he was handling. And to have done that without a break

for 46 years shows the sense of discipline and diligence that must have gone into the making of the man.

M.Krishnan was born on June 30, 1912 in Thachanallur, a small village near Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu. His father was the famous Tamil novelist of yesteryears, Madhaviah. Krishnan was the eighth child and he was named so (after the Lord) as was customary in Tamil families those days. Krishnan learnt botany under the famous plant taxonomist and authority on the flora of peninsular India, P F Fyson, during his M.A. (Botany) course at the Madras Presidency College in the early thirties. Fyson was a great influence on Krishnan. He went on to take a degree in Law from the Madras Law College in 1936.

Characteristically, after graduating in Law, Krishnan commenced his career as a commercial artist! And gave that up too, shortly afterwards to join the All India Radio. That too lasted only for a brief while.

Krishnan for the next 9-1/2 years worked in the small, forested princely state of Sandur (now in Karnataka). He started this innings first as a schoolmaster, then became a publicity officer and was a judge before finally becoming the State of Sandur's political secretary. There was never a dull moment in Krishnan's life. He was a keen cricketer too, playing and teaching the game. He was a commentator at a Ranji Trophy final in Madras. After the merger of princely states with the Indian Union in 1949, Krishnan was offered the IAS which he promptly turned down to remain a freelancer for the rest of his life. Krishnan would easily find a place amongst the greatest freelancers of all time: writing, sketching, carrying on independent research; publishing and so on.

Krishnan's monumental contribution to wildlife research in India was made between 1959 and 1970. He carried out a detailed ecological survey of the mammals of the peninsular India during that period. He was awarded the first Jawaharlal Nehru fellowship to do this work. The results of his survey were published in the Journals of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and in a popular book titled "India's Wildlife from 1959 – 1970", again published by the BNHS. Krishnan had carried out this survey with great devotion, faultless planning, unmatched skill and singular patience. The photographs he made in the course of this survey added to the legend he had already become. Krishnan's photographs were so famous because they trapped some aspect of the natural history of his chosen subject. Sambar sitting close to cinders from burning forest wood is a famous example. His pictures were the closest to the original anybody could get to.

Krishnan often put together his own camera to produce those candid

pictures. E.P.Gee one of India's pioneering wildlife photographers wrote in his famous book "Wildlife of India". "Every hair" must be his motto, for his pictures show the finest detail of coats of gaur, sambar, chital and the like and every wrinkle on the skin of a wild elephant. The camera I once saw him using in Guindy Park, Madras, was a large composite affair, with the body of one make and the tele-lens of another and other parts and accessories all mounted together by himself". Krishnan called his contraptions with such intriguing names as 'ponderosa' and 'super-ponderosa'!

When Krishnan was a school boy, he frequented a zoo in his holidays. Seeing his keen interest, he was given the privilege to stay for long hours and getting close to animals. Overcome my curiosity, he wanted to hold the barking deer firm and part its jaws to verify if indeed the barking deer had extra long and sharp canines. In the process the deer jerked and inflicted a deep gash on his arm. The scar remained with him till the end and Krishnan with characteristic humour concluded, "Barking dogs may not bite but barking deers do"!

Krishnan invariably mastered everything he was studying or handling. He could not tolerate shoddiness, incompetence or sham. His summary disposal of people and issues not meriting his attention, as judged by him, was a celebrated side of his personality. Krishnan berated pomp and show-off. He would show no mercy if you did not measure up to his exacting standards and bureaucracy has often borne the brunt.

The eccentricity belied the genial person that he was. He was a simple man. A youngster would get all the attention and if lucky, Krishnan would take him to his many fascinating worlds. It could be authentic natural history in ancient Tamil poetry; Krishnan would recite long verses from memory and explain his point with a rare aplomb. Or it could be the indigenous conservation traditions that are truly Indian. He would tell you the edicts of emperor Ashoka commanded his subjects to protect rare birds and animals and almost immediately, mention that the Vedanthangal bird sanctuary was the result of another great tradition where people by custom and religious conviction protected nature on their own. We have had both the top-down and bottom-up conversation traditions, he would say.

I recall fondly the many afternoons when I, sitting in the veranda of his simple house, have been regaled by his all round wisdom, pointed and honed. He once told me, "The First thing you learn in photography is that the camera lens does not see like the human eye and the last thing you master in photography is making the lens see like the human eye." Krishnan was a great artist too. His sketches and drawings of birds and animals were equally masterly, evoking boundless admiration from his wide circle of ardent fans and even discerning outsiders.

But it is as a nature chronicler that Krishnan has earned a unique place in the roll of honour of excellence. He could make the Indian jungle and countryside come alive in his writings. Not only the magnificent tiger or the majestic elephant occupied a place of pride in his writings, he lavished as much attention on monitor lizards, the partridge, the pangolin or the Indian fox. Krishnan's first hand intimate knowledge combined with his mastery of the English language helped weave those almost magical pieces of prose. The pangolin would be addressed as the 'animated pine cone'.

Talking about the small raptor 'shikra' Krishnan writes, "Ordinarily the shikra is not given to high jinks and public appearances, for it lives by thuggery and thugs do not proclaim themselves. It lurks in obscuring foliage waiting for the unsuspecting victim to approach before pouncing down on it....." Continuing this piece he writes about its frequent 'ki-kiyu' call during the breeding season, in the following manner. "To human ears few bird calls are more expressive of tantalized impatience at the slow, tedious progress of love imposed by nature"! The opening lines on an essay on the grey partridge transports you directly to the Indian country side. "The millet stands nine feet in the fields, and the heads are ripening in the sun. The scrub has a fresh, newly washed look after last weeks downpours, the skies are clear, and air crisp. Each morning the brave, resounding calls of partridges answer one another in the fields around, and at sunset they call again. November is here." The reader would be treated further to an uncommon delight. "There was a time when I used to wonder why a bird with amber and buff plumage, pale mottlings on the back and pencilled black bars across the breast, brown pinions and red legs, should be called grey partridge. I know the reason now. The 'grey' of course, does not specify colour, but denotes the indistinct broken-toned appearance of the bird – a certain lack of sharp entire shape." Krishnan saw and shared the grandeur in things seemingly simple". Krishnan was an authority on the Indian elephant. There are delightful pieces on it (besides telling pictures), on the gaur, the leopard, wild buffalo, the rhino and others. One has to read them oneself to know what an experience it could all be. 'Nights and Days', 'Jungle and Backyard' are two books that made Krishnan immensely popular. The Kodak Photo company held a special photo-exhibition of his pictures in his honour. He was placed in the Global 500 roll of honour and given the Global 500 award for trying to inform and stimulate interest in the public on the heritage of the wild flora and fauna of our country. This was in 1995. He was awarded the Padmashri in 1970. His wife Indu, apprehensive of her eccentric husband's unpredictable ways, wired the acceptance telegram herself when Krishnan was away in some faraway forest!

As mentioned earlier Krishnan had spent considerable time studying the elephant and he did so in an era when modern aids like telemetry

were unheard of. His scientific acumen and years of observations led him to put forth the theory that elephants used stomach rumblings to communicate with herd members. Years later, it was proved that indeed low frequency communication is used by elephants. Krishnan and achievements are testimony to the fact that science is not so much about gadgetry as it is about commonsense observation and devotion to the chosen subject.

Krishnan was quick-witted with a keen sense of humour. He once told me that he decided to study the elephant because he had an enlarged heart (smoking). Seeing the perplexed look on my face, he went on to explain, "Should an elephant decide to give the chase and should I succumb, I will have no regrets because even the guy with the best heart stands no chance, if an elephant decides to get after you". "Philip Crosland went and settled in native England in the sixties and his daughter Susan became a great admirer of Krishnan's and exchanged letters with him till his end. Krishnan wrote to her and here children illustrating his letters with sketches and drawings with undiminished enthusiasm for natural India. And in one of those letters Krishnan (written in 1990) drew an elderly man in a checked lungi, bald and bespectacled with cigarette in hand and asked in the letter. "And who is this disreputable – looking man in panchromatic rags?" And went on to answer it, "My dear Susan, that is me – my goodself" as my old –fashioned bank manager would say – "Dear Sir, we much regret having to inform your goodself that your account is again overdrawn. " For all the greatness that had come to be associated with him, Krishnan never lost the common touch.

He served on the Indian Board for Wildlife and on a couple of State Boards too. He applied his mind constantly and gave pointed recommendations to which most politicians never paid the attention they deserved. Nevertheless, Krishnan fulfilled his obligations to the best of his abilities, even when frustrating junctures confronted him. They had their lighter moments too. A hurried telegram summoned Krishnan to Delhi for a meeting. He got there and with no specific instructions about the venue, Krishnan searched the ministry's buildings. And he came across one where a meeting was in progress and the seat marked Tamil Nadu was vacant. Krishnan went in and occupied it. He heard a member saying something in a language he quite did not understand. Presently, the mystery was cleared up. The Chairman at the end of the presentation congratulated the member on the excellent rendering of an Oriya verse. Then he went on to invite the 'gentleman' from Tamil Nadu to recite a Tamil poem. After realising that Krishnan was sitting in the wrong meeting, he cleared his throat and started reciting. At the end of it everyone congratulated him on his very rhythmic verse. It was only later did Krishnan admit that he had uttered the multiplication table for four in Tamil!

Krishnan usually planned his field trips meticulously keeping in mind

the subject to be studied and photographed; the time of the year and the forest conditions were always factored in, in these plans. And on a certain field-trip unexpected rains confined him to the guest house for several days throwing his plans out of gear. Undeterred, Krishnan saw that there was a bat in the guest house and he proceeded to master bat photography (coping with frequent and fast flights in closed spaces) and produced some fine photographs of bats. His resilience and ability to see the uncommon in prosaic situations set him apart from others and added a certain unique dimension to his multi-dimensional personality.

It is no easy task to present the colourful personality of the stature of M. Krishnan in a few words. India's wilderness was an all-consuming concern all the 83 years of his eventful life. He was sad to see the destruction of and onslaught on Wild India. If things continue the reckless way they are going, sooner than later Indian's forests would all be gone.

Should we come to that dark and distressing juncture, writings and pictures like Krishnan's will all be what we will have to experience vicariously and long nostalgically for the charms and mystery of India's unique Natural Heritage.