

ON THE TRAIL OF INDIA'S DISAPPEARING VULTURES

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

Bharathidasan Subbiah has spent the past 10 years on the ground in various parts of Tamil Nadu, studying vultures — their habits, habitations, patterns and problems. There was a lot to document and understand, it was seven years into the process that he felt he knew enough to write on the subject. “I started writing my book three years ago,” says the conservationist over phone from Coimbatore, “And only now is it finally ready.”

Titled *In Search of Vultures*, the book is published by Kalamkriya, the social interest publication wing of Chennai-based Sanmar Group. It is bilingual and heavy not only on information, but also in images. Every page — and sometimes every column — written by Bharathidasan in Tamil, sits beside its counterpart translated into English. It lists facts as simple as the number of vulture species in existence on the planet, in the country, and in the State, as well as explaining issues as complex as the biochemical hazards endangering these birds. In between, it also weaves in instances of vultures being included in various cultures, mythologies and rituals, establishing them as an inherent part of human existence.

As the book's name suggests, Bharathidasan's focus is on the fact that the creature, once a common sight across the State, is becoming rarer and rarer to come by. The reasons for this are many, and human activity is more to blame than other phenomenon. This is not a claim made lightly, as the book relies not only on Bharathidasan's own research, but also on the works of other conservationists and filmmakers. The book lists out numerous cases in which man-made chemicals, be it pesticide in plants or medicine administered to cattle, have lingered in the food chain even after creatures that consumed them passed away, and stayed potent long enough to affect scavengers like vultures who only consume the corpse. These cases aside, another common reason for the vulture's disappearance is plain indifference. “As critical as the vulture is to our ecosystem, it is sad to see that even today, the bird is seen in a negative light,” he rues, highlighting the need for simple, accessible information that can turn this tide.

The author-conservationist believes that there is enough information out there to change public perception of the bird. The most stark example, featured in the book, is a town called Thirukazhukundram. Located near Chengalpattu, the town (named after the bird) has a temple whose priests had been feeding *prasadam* to vultures till well into the late 1900s. “I was a very young child when the late ornithologist Salim Ali wrote about witnessing these birds partake of temple *prasadam*. I remember being fascinated by the idea, of members of a purely scavenger species eating *sakkara pongal*. But it did happen, and it was documented, though the ritual had stopped long before I could eventually visit the place,” he says.

In his book, Bharathidasan mentions not only the writings of naturalists and ornithologists who have either witnessed or tried to explain these incidents (and their gradual dwindling), but also Buddhist, Hindu and other scriptures that mention something similar. The intention here is not to create fervour, but to try and understand why this deviation from the norm occurred and why it stopped. “We tell this story on field when we want people to feel interested in vultures,” says Bharathidasan, signing off with, “It helps create a bit of intrigue.”

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