

## The Pair Beside The Lake

It happened long ago. A poet who lived by a lake, saw a strange site one day. Two great birds were dancing beside the lake. The male courted the female; he danced around her, pirouetted on his legs, jumped in the air and made chivalrous bows. The coy female accepted with gentle nods. Both were so entranced that they forgot the world around them. The poet saw to his horror, a hunter approaching. A swift movement and an arrow struck the male. Terror-stricken the female saw her mate fall. But she did not run away. She tried to rouse him by her beak and doggedly stood her ground. The hunter closed in and the female too fell beside her mate.

The poet saw the tragic end of the couple in courtship and a poem took shape in his mind. So was born the great Indian epic the Ramayana which still entralls millions in India, Burma, Thailand, and Indonesia.

The pair that inspired the epic grace the Indian countryside even today. But the hunter too is not far away. The hunter in a different garb, still stalks the pair and may put an end to their lives if.....

But before anything happens let me tell you the full story of the great birds since that epochal event beside the lake.

Millions of years ago, before the rise of the Himalaya, a great sea surged where the plains of north India sprawl today. As the Himalaya rose, the sea retreated, leaving

behind a great trough which was filled up with silt brought down from the mountains by India's great rivers the Ganga and the Yamuna. A great alluvial plain was formed through which flowed innumerable streams, great and small, that often changed their courses and left behind lakes and marshlands.

Then man came and quickly settled the fertile plains. He saw with delight the great variety of animals and birds that belonged to the land. Though he killed some of them for food, he began admiring many others for the nobility of their character. One of the great birds who was always seen in pairs, he called Sarus for <sup>he always lived beside a lake.</sup> his strident, bugle-like call. He admired his graceful looks, his ardent courtship and the great devotion the pair showed to each other. For him Sarus became the symbol of conjugal love. He felt sorry for what happened on that fateful day beside the lake and vowed never to repeat it. Sarus was protected, almost the fear of man and came to live beside his village.

During the tumultuous historical period when the fortunes of various dynasties waxed and waned, India's countryside and village life changed little. The village life centred around the market square and the temple. The village produced enough for its own consumption and bartered the surplus for its other needs. It drew water from wells and the village pond bordered by tall reeds; and in these reeds the Sarus pair built their nest and laid two eggs. The marsh around the pond provided food for their chicks and the pair

often visited cultivation to glean fallen grain after the harvest. No one bothered the pair or their chicks. They were a part of the village scene as was the stork who nested on the tall Banyan tree and the monkey living on the temple tower. The land teemed with ponds and marshes and Sarus was everywhere. Its clarion<sup>n</sup> like call marked the beginning of another day for many a village family.

It appeared that the hunter had been permanently banished. But no! The tranquillity of village life was destined to be shattered by events that took shape in cities and faraway capitals.

Cities continued to grow and started drawing the village surplus to them. Then they started dictating what the villagers should sow and reap. They sent into the village new seeds, fertilizers and water from the canals. Many village ponds went into disuse, got filled up with village waste and soon dried up. Machines roared into fields and drove the birds away. Roads and highways cut through the countryside, dividing fields and bisecting the Sarus territory. Fields that once grew grain changed to cash crops like sugarcane and tobacco. Marshes were drained for expanding agriculture and lastly industry made its appearance in the village. Labour from distant lands poured in for construction and factory work, set up shacks and spoiled the remaining ponds. weeds spread where once the lotus bloomed and the lily blossomed. Fertilizers and insecticides washed from the fields entered the ponds and killed freshwater plants and animals. Village

ponds became cesspools of filth.

I clearly saw all this when I travelled several hundred miles through the Sarus country. I travelled across Orissa, the region where rice is said to have its origin. For I knew that in the absence of marshes, Sarus often resorted to flooded rice fields. But there was no Sarus in Orissa (see map). From Orissa I entered south Bihar and then stepped into the great alluvial plain of the Ganga and the Yamuna.

In vain did I look for sarus till I reached the very centre of the ganga-Yamuna flood plain. I asked the villagers, showed them coloured pictures of sarus but everyone told me, "Sarus used to be in our villages some years ago. but now it is gone."

When at last I met my first sarus pair, I had behind me half the region of the Sarus range as described by the ornithological texts.

I jerked the vehicle to a stop when I saw the pair quietly gleaning grain in a harvested field. Not far from the pair the cultivator and his family were working. It was the same tranquil scene that I had envisioned several times. A thrill ran through me, probably the same feeling the poet experienced on that fateful day.

I asked the cultivator to show me the vilage pond. He took me to a small lake surrounded by stately mango trees. In one corner was the familiar reed-bed---the home of the Sarus.

"2-3 families nest here", he told me. I then visited another lake not far away. This was overgrown with aquatic vegetation. But there I saw the Sarus pair with two juveniles--gray and cinnamon-brown, small replicas of their tall parents.

I continued to meet Sarus as I travelled. I saw them in the fields gleaning fallen grain, even attacking standing crop of rice and wheat. I asked the cultivators how they felt about the loss of their crop. "Its not much," they carelessly remarked. I saw Sarus with juveniles foraging in shallow ponds and marshes. Once as I was watching Sarus in a marsh, a village boy came and told me that a road was being planned through a part of the marsh. "Do you like it?" I asked him. "No, I don't want to lose all these birds," he said. Beside Sarus there <sup>were</sup> Blacknecked and Painted Stork, Spoonbill, Ibis, Cormorant and a lot of ducks.

I saw Sarus coming together for rest under trees and I witnessed their evening social gatherings when they collected in flocks to play, run, chase eachother, dance and jump in the most delightful manner. As the sun set, I saw them winging their way to a roost in a wide and shallow basin of a river.

Gradually I came to understand how Sarus spent their day. Principally their time was spent in feeding and resting. While pairs with chicks fed chiefly in marshlands, pairs without chicks resorted to agricultural feilds. During the

warmer part of the day, they rested under shady trees or in large pools or on riverbanks. A number of pairs gathered at the rest spots. They then preened vigorously to keep their feathers clean and trim. The evening social time was important too. It was then that the newly-recruited adults probably found their mates and already mated pairs resuscitated their bond. these social gatherings took place in fallow fields and what we called "waste" lands. The habitat-combination that Sarus appeared to favour best, was marshes, ponds, fallow land and cultivation---in that order.

By now I had criss-crossed a lot of Sarus country. When I returned I started going through my notes. I had observed over 1200 Sarus in different regions. It was gratifying to see that Sarus was still protected. Except a few pockets inhabited by hunter-gatherer tribes who killed with bow and arrow, anything that was moving, Sarus was not hunted. The great birds even prospered in certain areas. They had taken over strips bordering irrigation canals where water seeping through canals had created wetlands. In these Sarus nested throughout the year. The year-round availability of shallow water and marsh probably triggered the nesting behaviour.

It was wonderful to find the hunter vanished from the Sarus scene.

But when I probed deeper, certain disturbing features became visible. In regions Sarus was numerous, not many pairs could breed successfully. for many of them enough breeding

habitat was just not available. Marshes and ponds had gone under the plough or had been reclaimed for other uses. If the greatest concentration of Sarus was not able to breed with success, declining population would be the result.

In regions where agriculture was mechanised, was dependent on heavy doses of fertilizers and insecticides, no Sarus was to be found. Sarus appeared to have retreated to the so-called "backward" areas, where agriculture was still traditional, where returns were low as very little fertilizers and insecticides were used and where human population densities and urbanisation were at a lower key.

What if these regions also come under the spell of economic progress? Where will the sarus go then? Are great birds like the sarus and the Stork incompatible with human economic progress? Which then will you prefer dear reader, the pair beside the lake, or your car and the super market?

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