

## Ranjit Lal's 'Down in Jungleground' as Nature Writing

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### Abstract

Nature writing as a genre has been explored around the world with more attention in the present times for reasons best known to mankind. The potent influence of this new “culture of nature” decentralises man and calls attention for the cause of its conservation. This paper is an attempt at proving how a newspaper column on nature, qualifies the genre of “nature writing.” Ranjit Lal calls himself “author, environmentalist and birdwatcher” in his column ‘Down in Jungleground’ in the Indian Express, EYE magazine. Selected articles of Lal are analysed to prove how they perform the function of a true work of nature writing. Significant parameter for evaluating “nature writing” is considered to establish Ranjit Lal as a nature writer. Nature writers in India include the likes of Douglas Dewar, E.H. Aitken, Jim Corbet, Salim Ali, Valmik Thapar and the lesser known writers like M. Krishnan, Richard Grimmett, Carol Inskipp, Tim Inskipp, Pradip Krishna, Perna Singh Bindra, M.K. Ranjitsinh and more. Among these stalwarts of nature writing, Ranjit Lal, as a columnist of the Indian Express emerges as a passionate crusader for the cause of the environment and has a keen appreciation of every little creature in the natural world. Lal calls himself “an author, environmentalist and birdwatcher” whose forte includes bird watching and wildlife narratives. A journalist with over 1000 articles/features published in over 50 publications, his obsession with nature and the animal world is infectious. He is a passionate ‘environmentalist’ who champions for the cause of the lesser mortals whom he considers far superior to their gloating counterparts. His light-hearted tone makes for easy and pleasurable reading. Undoubtedly, with his attractive style of writing and strong descriptive powers of the species of nature, Lal is capable of generating respect and concern which otherwise would have had lesser impact. Nothing is too ordinary for his attention in the world of the untamed—he is as much intrigued by the delicate dragonfly as the mysterious fire flies. Peacocks and parakeets, equines and elephants, barbs and barbules, rats and rhesus gain equal recognition in Lal’s work.

**Key Words:** Influence, Environmentalist, Birdwatcher, Wildlife

This paper is an attempt at asserting how a newspaper column on nature qualifies the genre of “nature writing.” Significant parameters for evaluating “nature writing” is considered to establish Lal as a nature writer. Ranjit Lal calls himself the author, environmentalist and birdwatcher in his column ‘Down in Jungleground’ in the EYE magazine of the Indian Express. What qualifies these columns for “nature writing” is the unrelenting presence of nature in all its captivating hues and forms in his compelling

narratives about the green world. His encounters in nature are always in the first person narrative and he is the actual observer in the natural environment.

As Stewart Frank writes in *A Natural History of Nature Writing*, “Nature writing is the pursuit of the seeable and the unseeable. It is an attempt to give voice to ‘the corn and the grass and the atmosphere writing’, as Thoreau asserted, to speak for what cannot speak. It is also an attempt to transform us in a way that seems impossible but is essential if we are to

realise, in a biologically diverse world, a future that is moral and compassionate.” He further appeals, “Whether scientists or poets, nature writers make us aware that neither biology nor imagination by itself can illuminate the call of the last American timber wolf, the tossing meadow grasses in a mountain rainstorm, the strangely shining organism that cruise the deep oceans, or the sweet tumbling notes of a thrush. But both disciplines, working together, may give us a new, more powerful lens of perception.” (Stewart xix)

Shashank Kela in his article, ‘Where the Wild Things are Not’, discusses the need for and the functions of nature writing in the present times:

What we are engaged in doing has profound aesthetic and moral consequences, and one of the functions of nature writing is to point them out. As a genre, it is inherently capacious, capable of encompassing natural history, literature, political economy, travelogue, poetry and more besides. Which is why we need it more than ever in our current predicament—not just more of it, but more varied, and (last but not least) better written. (caravanmagazine.in)

Similarly, in a presentation at the 1995 ASLE conference, John Elder sums up traditionally defined nature writing as “a form of the personal, reflective essay grounded in attentiveness to the natural world and an appreciation of science but also open to the spiritual meaning and intrinsic value of nature.”(Armbruster. K, 2001) Accordingly, a text falls under the category of “nature writing” if:

- it is based on immediate, scientifically apt observations of nature.

- the first persona narrator is at the same time the actual observer in natural environment.
- it directs the reader towards aesthetic appreciation of nature.
- it is a non-fiction work that is lyrical, informational and apolitical.
- it has rural, wilderness areas or quasi-wild borders as the usual subject.
- it is exploratory and reflective (it learns about and from nature).
- it is relational (about the interconnections and interrelationships that form our world).
- it is positive (Despite the challenges, difficulties and tragedies in the world, there is inherent hope for changes).
- considers the fate of humanity and nature as inseparable. (Abdurrahmani, Tidita)

According to an American ecocritic, Thomas J. Lyon “nature writing must have three main dimensions to it: natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature.” (Lyon. T., 1989). Patrick D.

In the light of the above parameters, one can witness that Lal’s writings are infused with details of the wild ranging from various species of birds, animals, insects, plants, and even the inanimate like the mighty Himalayas. He is also passionate about the ones who have any sort of relationship with the wild. Here is a description of his regard for the forest personnel, for instance, in ‘Voices in the Wilderness’ (EYE: January 12, 2020) where he is aware of their everyday struggles with the wildlife and the lack of resources, “We need as many stalwarts in the

field as possible: to poke their noses into the lives of secretive animals (so they can be protected better), to conceive plans to “manage” forests and to guard against poachers, encroachers and mafia. We need to listen to these voices in the wilderness and make their work easier for them.”

‘Bringing the World Home’ (EYE: January 5, 2020) discusses the need for bringing children into close contact with hands-on personal interaction with nature to get them interested in nature. “To my mind, the only way to get kids to be permanently interested in the natural world is to expose them to it —at a personal, hands-on level.” He offers solutions in the various forms like; making it mandatory to keep pet animals, watching and studying the development of various animals very closely for unforgettable experiences, regular visits to national parks and sanctuaries, also letting them experience the negative side to nature so that they have a wholesome view of nature.

‘Four Legs and Our Tongues’ (EYE: December 8, 2019) is a hilarious account of the cultural connotations of addressing people with animal names and how we consider these names derogatorily. Lal gives an account of all the linguistic expressions across cultures that demean the very existence of animals. No species from the animal kingdom is spared; Animals, reptiles, birds, fish, insects, rats, cats, dogs, donkeys, monkeys, foxes, hyenas, wolves, jackals, pigs, rhinos, reptiles, vultures, owls, cuckoos, sharks, weasels, butterflies, cockroaches and many more, form the subject of his contemplation. He ends the column with another witty statement about the inability of writers to be politically correct with an amusing twist, “For writers to be politically correct and not use the names of animals derogatorily in their work will be an elephantine task.”

‘A Clean Bill of Health’ (EYE: December 1, 2019) is about lessons of cleanliness from the animal world. He gives instances of animals with fastidious cleaning habits, especially, when it comes to disposing their refuse. According to Lal, humans fare really poorly in comparison with these well groomed animals and birds. His diligence in scientific observation of nature is evident in the instance where he watches a darter preen itself for 45 long minutes! He is in awe of the usefulness of the insect world too, in clearing their waste. For instance, he tells us about how the humble dung beetle became a very significant solution in tackling sheep and cattle dung in Australia when their numbers soared. Nature’s regard for cleanliness is extended to its green companions too. Like, he talks about the inbuilt cleaning system of the vegetable kingdom when he claims, “Mother Nature’s immediate pick-up squads are on call: fallen fruit is taken by deer and other grazers. The kills of carnivores are cleaned up by hyenas, jackals and vultures (which, believe it or not, are the cleanest birds around): nothing is left to rot and spread disease. Besides, all fruit come in their own custom-wrapping — their skins.” The woeful inadequacy of the human species in nature is quite apparent when he says, “Only humans need to encase bananas — and other fruits and vegetables — in industrial-strength plastic cladding to which nothing can happen for the next 5,000 years. We’ve poisoned our air and water and the earth itself and we think we’re the cat’s whiskers! And, then, we rudely tell someone making a mess: “Don’t be such a pig!”

In ‘Get Down and Dirty’ (EYE: November 24, 2019) Lal acknowledges the need for children to have personal contact with nature. Once again, the essence of nature’s interconnections and interrelationships that form our world is brought to the fore. He

mourns the present generation's obsession with gadgets and screen which have led to this generation's apathy towards the wellbeing of the natural world. This reiterates Richard Louv's theory about the 'Nature-Deficit Disorder', wherein Louv portends the notion of children developing psychological issues when deprived of contact with nature:

Nature-deficit disorder describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. The disorder can be detected in individuals, families, and communities. Nature deficit can even change human behavior in cities, which could ultimately affect their design, since long-standing studies show a relationship between the absence, or inaccessibility, of parks and open space with high crime rates, depression, and other urban maladies.

These columns are replete with instances where Lal brings out his keen eye for detail and rich experiences in nature. They also serve as a valuable lesson for the inexperienced one and a warning for those who try to tamper with nature. For instance the wit in the following lines serve as an eye-opener for a novice in nature, "it was foolish to throw pebbles at a wasp's nest; that there was no way you could catch fish with a bent paper clip and ball of atta; or that you could raise baby shrimps in ex-whisky bottles filled with water!" Similarly, the following lines suggest the need to be respectful and tender with nature, "Hunting" butterflies with a rubber band and paper pellet was a very stupid thing to do — if you hit one, all you got was the tattered remnants of something that had been very beautiful." The lack of interest in the natural world saddens this nature enthusiast when he says, "There's no better feeling than to find out things for yourself and the pleasure you get when you

triumphantly tell yourself, "Ah, now I know!" What alarms me is the number of youngsters growing up without an interest or curiosity in anything particular."

Lal is appalled at the modern man's aversion to dirt and germs. Parents' overriding notion of cleanliness which drives the young generation away from enjoying natural occurrences in nature like the muddy puddles in the rain, is also a grave grievance according to him. What he says about this apathy towards natural phenomenon in nature, may well serve as a warning for those who deprive children from getting themselves dirty and being a part of nature, "Anyone who has excelled in his or her field has done so because something about their subject has kindled their curiosity. Mother Nature is full of the zany, bewildering, and beautiful. To adapt from Carl Sagan, "Out there are a billion, zillion mysteries waiting to be unravelled!" So get down and dirty and begin figuring them out."

Lal's forte as a nature writer includes both the animate and the inanimate world. This is evident in his book review of Stephen Alter's work, 'Wild Himalaya book review: In High Places' (EYE: November 17, 2019). In this column, he waxes eloquent about the grandeur of the mighty Himalayas. What he claims about Alter, proves his philosophical leanings as a true nature writer:

I would (if I could!) make this book mandatory reading for anyone planning to visit the Himalaya. (There are stupendous pictures too!) Hopefully, it will help you stop demanding wifi and cable TV from your hotel and make you go out to the window, and stand and stare. You can be sure, that as they have been doing for millennia, the mountains will reach out to you, and gently deflate

your overblown ego in the best way possible.

‘Memories of Sambhar’ (EYE: December 22, 2019) is a lament over the declining population of migratory birds in the Sambhar Lake due to man’s interference in the form of salt extraction. Similarly, ‘Hop, Skip and Jump’ (EYE: November 10, 2019) is all about the interesting world of bunnies. He gives a riveting account of their physical makeup, right from how much they weigh to how they grow, breed, and how they have interesting personalities. His interest in hares and rabbits cross the natural terrain when he quips about their pervasiveness in literature too. One is aware of the scholarship of Lal as an environmentalist when he is also worried about a particular species of hares getting extinct.

Lal is not a misanthropist, although he may appear to love and respect the animal kingdom more. This is apparent in his regard for the likes of Greta Thunberg, who have put their entire lives at stake for a cause larger than their personal lives. ‘Going Great Greta’ (EYE: November 3, 2019) is a tribute to the power of the young and feisty teen environmentalist Greta Thunberg who has challenged the adult world for its irresponsible and irreparable damage to the environment. He is in awe of Greta’s courage to question the UN, “how dare you?” Hope is an essential trait of nature writing which could appear bleak at times. This is apparent when Lal asserts the need to educate the young to ask more questions and although his graphic warning contains the serious consequences of our actions sarcastically put, there is a glimmer of hope hidden in his warning, when he says, “The fat cats and politicians need to try one thing: Stick their heads into a bell jar full of carbon dioxide (and other noxious gases) and breathe. That’s the future they’re handing over to their

beloved heirs (and electorates). And all the gold and money and stock options and bribes in the world are not going to be of any use when your last breath is a rattling gasp. Believe me, there’s no feeling quite like when your lungs fold up like a soggy brown-paper bag and you just can’t breathe.”

‘Butterfly Effect’ (EYE: October 27, 2019) is once again a very illuminating account of the lives of the less attractive cousin of the butterfly, the humble moth. The flourish with which he describes their fascination for the light bulb mistakenly understood as the moon; their interesting diet which makes up of many exotic drinks; their captivating hues and soft textured wooly coats; and very unusual breeding techniques, these informative pieces definitely emerge as befitting works of nature writing.

The activist in Lal finds an overt expression in ‘Once Upon a Time in Aarey’ (EYE: September 22, 2019) which is a requiem for the dying forest of the great Aarey colony. Lal’s relationship with Aarey dates back to his student years and he feels resentful towards the government’s apathy towards its protection. The environmentalist in him is quite apparent when he describes the ecosystem of the forest in great detail and wonders why the government is oblivious of the effects of destroying such an important facet of the city’s ecosystem in the name of progress.

The exploratory and reflective quality of nature writing is obvious in ‘Season of Scars’ (EYE: September 15, 2019) which calls attention to man’s neglectful apathy towards snakes. He considers this revulsion in man to be the effect of culture rather than nature. According to him, our ignorance about the reptile is the main reason for our disgust and fear. He describes the different species of snakes and the need to inculcate appreciation

for the reptile, among the young generation by wittily concluding, “I think they’d prefer it hands down to 45 minutes of Algebra.”

The inseparable link between man and nature is another important facet of nature writing. ‘Hello Sunshine’ (EYE: September 1, 2019) is such an account of the variety of the winged kind which Lal lovingly begins with the caption to the photograph of a bulbul which says, “Hey sleepy-head, wake up and look lively! The sun’s coming up, in case you haven’t noticed.” These lovely birds work as alarm clocks for the writer in Lal. He gets into describing a variety of bulbuls in great detail which only makes one wonder if there is anything in nature that escapes Lal’s attention. He is concerned about a few of the species that are endangered too and concludes by wishing, “Bulbuls can be a tonic for stressed out city-dwellers. Just check out a pair as they flit around in the foliage, calling cheerfully to one another and you’re sure to feel better and lighter. Ah, but if you could only join them!”

In the plant kingdom, although mangroves are considered to be the lungs of the city, man’s apathy towards them has never been so apparent as the present times. They have been callously dismantled for man’s insatiable diet for more. In ‘The Importance of Mangroves’ (EYE: August 4, 2019) Lal compares the contribution of the humble mangroves to a counsellor and an introvert. “Surely they must be amongst the most remarkable and valuable plants in the world. Mangroves thrive in a hostile environment, and like a very good counsellor, sooth the seething temper of a vengeful sea when it roars ashore, seeking what we have robbed from it.” “Meanwhile, mangroves, in their quiet introverted way, continue their work, soothing the angry seas, cleaning up the muck we deposit in them, providing a home and nursery for a myriad of creatures and hoping

to give even the most hard-bitten “survival expert” a very muddy, glutinous and frustrating time indeed.”

‘May the Best Man Win’ (EYE: June 2, 2019) is a humorous take on the most magnificent of the avian kind, the peacock. However, Lal does not regale you with platitudes for the beautiful peacock but instead, maintains that the peacock is burdened by its glamorous plume, “ [a] huge impediment, always a deadweight when you have to fly, and ever ready to snag in branches and thorns, if you had to get away from a tiger or leopard.” Further, one learns about the purpose of these heavy plume as a device for sexually selection.

‘Terms of Engagement’ (EYE: May 12, 2019) is a marvellous account of nature’s need to sustain itself through procreation. The mating maneuvers of insects, birds and mammals form the subject for the naturalist in Lal. There is so much for a nature enthusiast to learn from the exotic details of Lal’s writings. For instance, any lay person would be confounded at the knowledge of the different systems that plants employ during pollination, “to ensure that they don’t satiate themselves at one bar, the taps are shut off once the flower senses a bee has had enough. If it wants more, it has to go elsewhere, to another bloom.” Similarly, “There would be no making out (and subsequent seed-making) if the bee first visits a lily, say, and then goes off to drop in on a sunflower. So gradually, the plants shape themselves so that only one particular species of insect will find it suitable to visit them...” The very fact that the plant kingdom has a mind of its own is stupefying in this instance where he describes the manipulative techniques employed by the orchids to ensure pollination by a particular kind, “The flowers of several orchid species turn out looking like the ladies of whichever

insect — bee or wasp or fly — that the plant needs.”

George Monbiot, another nature writer, marks the essence of nature conservation as love for the living world and believes it to be the fuel that galvanises any environmental movement:

The reality is that we care because we love. Nature appealed to our hearts, when we were children, long before it appealed to our heads, let alone our pockets . . . Acknowledging our love for the living world does something that a library full of papers on sustainable development and ecosystem services cannot: it engages the imagination as well as the intellect. It inspires belief; and this is essential to the lasting success of any movement. (commondreams)

In view of the above quote, Lal’s columns are a rich reservoir of nature’s amazing

possibilities. To a nature enthusiast, on the move and to any budding writer and admirer of the natural world, Lal’s columns offer an abundance of material showcased in exotic finery for easy access. The crispness of these columns and their regular frequency is also an added advantage to the lot who want to explore but have little time to spare as they offer hope for the young who want to save and protect whatever is left of nature and at the same time serve as an initiation for the likes who wish to contribute for all they are worth. In the grand scheme of the few meaningful steps taken towards ecological conservation, Lal’s columns definitely emerge as true “nature writing” and play a significant part in ecological conservation. As Rachel Carson who catalysed the modern environment, famously said, “The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.”

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