

Scaling Up

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The revised, expanded edition
of the classic book *Snakeman*

Zai Whitaker

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 **juggernaut**

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For Shama

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Introduction

I grew up in one of the most beautiful homes in Bombay: the best that good taste and empty pockets can create. The empty pockets were important, and resulted in innovation, careful spending and spare aesthetics that left guests wide-eyed with admiration. My mother, Laeeq, puts it well in her book *Gardening*: ‘Perhaps it was an advantage that we had a house before we had an income, for the need to organize the land without any money was good training.’ And earlier in the same book, in a backhanded compliment to my father, she writes: ‘The influence of (my) conservationist husband Zafar Futehally, has persuaded (me) to avoid creating gardens which make unreasonable demands on scarce resources (including money), and to search for environmentally inexpensive ways of making a piece of land beautiful.’ As for the good taste, it was a combination of genetic luck and twenty years in Kobe, Japan, where she was born and grew up. Her careers were writing and garden design; her projects included the Powai and Vihar public gardens in Bombay (now Mumbai) and the

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campuses of Larsen and Toubro and Bharat Electronics in Bangalore (now Bengaluru). Her writing and editing skills were put to good use as Literary Editor of *Quest* magazine and elsewhere.

My ornithologist father, Baba, wore several hats in those halcyon days of conservation in India and laid the foundation for many research initiatives, projects and Protected Areas. Encouraged by my granduncle Sálím Ali, he started the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* in 1959 and remained its editor for forty-five years, until 2004. Initially cyclostyled at Dynacraft – the company of which he and brother Nazar were owners – it created a fantastic network of birdwatchers throughout the country. He was honorary secretary of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) from 1961 to 1973 (and a co-editor of the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* or *JBNHS*); executive board member of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for a year, then its vice president for six years. In this last capacity, he organized the tenth General Assembly of the IUCN in 1969, which marked the advent of conservation in the country.

He went on to start the Indian chapter of the WWF (World Wildlife Fund, now World Wide Fund for Nature). He was one of the two non-official members of the steering committee of Project Tiger, part of wildlife protection committees in many states and the Centre, served on the Maharashtra State Wildlife Advisory Board, wrote

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prolifically on conservation, democracy and ornithology, accompanied Sálím Mamoo on bird surveys, and helped kick-start important wildlife studies – among others, on the Gir lion, the barasingha, Nilgiri tahr and great Indian bustard. And there were the environment assessment committees he was part of, such as for Rashtriya Chemicals and Fertilizers, which invariably ended with the committee's recommendations being ignored. Additionally, there were horses and riding, at a level where his horsemanship was praised by an equerry at Buckingham Palace, where Baba spotted a stallion he wanted to ride, mounted it in spite of the palace team's discomfort and astounded them with his horsemanship. A conservationist friend who was related to the royals and knew of his passion for horses had arranged that memorable ride for Baba.

Over the years, our dining table in Andheri hosted several of the world's conservation pioneers: gorilla–tiger–panda biologist Dr George Schaller, Sir Peter Scott of the Slimbridge Wildlife Trust, Gerald Durrell's curators from Jersey Zoo, Sir Hugh Elliot of the IUCN, Dr Dillon Ripley, Sálím Mamoo's friend and colleague from the Smithsonian Institution, and Richard and Maisie Fitter of the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society. The Indian contingent included M. Krishnan, Anne Wright, Vasant Rajyadhaksha, Duleep Matthai and, of course, Sálím Mamoo, who was a regular visitor.

As must be obvious by now, gentle reader, Dynacraft

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was not a priority for my father. Birdwatching, conservation and horses left him little time for the trivial task of making money.

Both my parents were products of interesting DNA. There was Laeeq's uncle Sálim and Zafar's grandfather Badruddin Tyabji, who lived and died (in 1906) during the British period, also a legend – he was Chief Justice of Bombay, and later president of the Indian National Congress. Other family members included A.A.A. Fyzee, the Islamic scholar and India's ambassador to several countries, who went on to become vice chancellor of Aligarh University; Atiya Begum, who started and ran one of the literary and cultural hubs of Bombay; Danial Latifi, the lawyer, and spiritual leader and renowned singer Raihana Tyabji, an associate of Gandhiji. The family's UIDs were humour, integrity and patriotism; many were a strong force in the freedom struggle, and very few chose to move to Pakistan after Independence. They were also a modern-thinking, liberal bunch. Spouses of many different religions and countries were absorbed into the '*khandaan*'. One of these would be my future husband, Breezy/Rom/Romulus.

The conservation bug bit us three kids as well . . . after all, we'd heard about wildlife protection, Ramsar sites and habitat loss practically since the day we were born; maybe even before, because Amma was helping Sálim Mamoo write popular bird articles and books while she was pregnant with me. Words like ecosystem, ecology and biodiversity were to

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clamber into common use later. My sister Shama spent six months – the gap between school and college – working at the IUCN in Morges, Switzerland. From this experience, as well as having been Baba's unpaid typist from an early age, she had absorbed a good understanding of conservation issues and needs. On her return and while studying for a BA at St Xavier's College, she helped out at the WWF-India office. Together, and then with very limited resources, the father-daughter team managed to get an organization going that was to be at the core of the conservation movement of the 1970s. Her achievements were remarkable for one so young; she once lurked outside Sálím Mamoo's office until he seemed to be in a good mood, then handed him a letter she'd drafted for him to sign, urging Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to scrap the hydel project on the Kuntipuzha River in Kerala that would submerge the major part of the Silent Valley forests. She felt his signature would make a big difference to the campaign to save Silent Valley because of his stature as well as his personal friendship with Mrs Gandhi. He did, and she was right. His support on a conservation cause worked magic.

Around the same time, the WWF newsletter carried an article on Silent Valley by one Romulus Whitaker, an American herpetologist living in Madras (now Chennai) who was becoming well known in conservation circles. Along with the article came a request for five thousand rupees for his snake park. My father and other members

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of the Executive Committee admired Rom's work and knew it was important to draw reptiles into the ambit of conservation. In its infancy, with limited funds, WWF managed to give the Snake Park that vital donation, not a sniffy sum in those days.

So, when our paths crossed (to be described later), it was a perfect conservation partnership: the desk babu (me) and the hands-on herpetologist and jungle wanderer (Rom). Thanks to this combination of skills and interests, we were able to work together and set up the first herpetological organization in the country and put reptiles on the Indian conservation map. Our teamwork included campaigns and pestering of bureaucrats, raising funds and networking with other conservationists and organizations, all while carrying out the collection, breeding and rewilding of endangered species. Of course, there were often overlaps, such as writing and editing reports together, or me collecting mugger eggs or helping Rom dissect and skin a saltie (saltwater crocodile).

This is the story of that partnership, one that also delivered a result that we are particularly proud of – the creation of a new generation of conservationists, thanks to the volunteers, interns and researchers who worked with us at the Snake Park, Croc Bank, field projects and field stations. It is a story with highs and lows, and many twists and turns as our conservation journey scaled up.

The title of the book comes from a conversation with Sálím Mamoo, who visited me in Madras soon after I

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got married and asked how I was getting on. I gave him a pompous reply about how satisfying it was to work for this neglected group of animals. 'Birds and mammals get all the attention,' said I, 'but reptiles are equally important . . .' He looked a bit taken aback, did his famous head-bobbing, and said 'Oh, so you're SCALING them up, are you?' A great example of his quick repartee and impatience with pomposity! And makes a great title – thanks!

How do I thank publisher–editor–writer Anita Mani? For suggesting this project in the first place, then for her fine editor's eye, and most importantly, for convincing me that my own story was also worth telling, resulting in a self-belief far more valuable to me than the book.



Hello, Hippiss!

Rom grew up in Hoosick, upstate New York, where he lived from birth (1943) to 1947 with his mother, Doris Norden, and sister, Gail, in his Aunt Elly's Dutch mansion which had adjoining gardens and a beautiful lake. This idealistic childhood saw the beginning of his lifelong fascination for snakes. There were plenty of harmless garters and milk snakes in the surrounding countryside during the summer months, but more importantly, his mother encouraged this hobby and interest in every possible way. His alphabet songs did not follow the usual pattern of A for apple, B for bat; it was A for amphibian, B for brontosaurus, C for coral snake. Doris even stoutly defended him when one of his pets, a DeKay's snake, showed up in the glove compartment of a neighbour's car. When it was time to think about school, it was St Luke's in New York City, very different from the free, liberal atmosphere of Hoosick. It was not a happy fit, and his mother later told me how his teacher ended up installing a punching bag for his exclusive use.

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Within two years, there was another move, this time further afield, to Bombay. Doris had married Rama Chattopadhyaya, son of the freedom fighter Kamaladevi, who became the main force behind the movement to revive our traditional handicrafts. Aged eight and twelve, the two children, Rom and Gail, were sent to boarding school, at first to Lovedale in the Nilgiris and a year later to Kodaikanal International School in the Palani Hills. There, the evergreen shola forests provided plenty of diversion from boring studies and Rom began a systematic collection of snakes, lizards and bugs. Many of these lived under his bed and enjoyed the time and attention that his studies were deprived of. His association with the sholas of Kodai spelt the beginning of a deep interest in tropical rainforests, and thirty years later, he helped form the Palani Hills Conservation Council to protect the unique environment of these hills.

At Kodai International, children were encouraged in outdoor activities and this suited Rom just fine. You could go off and camp for the weekend at Gundar Falls, Neptune's Pool, Berijam Lake and other beautiful, forested spots within hiking distance. At age twelve, Rom made a jump into the world of venomous snakes. A Russell's viper swimming in the cold Berijam Lake at an elevation of 2,000 metres caught his attention while on a camp. It was carefully picked up in a butterfly net and deposited in his lunch box. It lived with him for a few days, until some of his older friends wisely advised him to get rid of it. After reading, in the only snake book

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The Thalaiyar Falls are the most prominent landmark as you ascend the ghats up to Kodaikanal. In peak season, they are an impressive sight, but deforestation has reduced them to a mere trickle for most of the year.

in the library, that it was ‘one of the most virulent snakes in all of British India and causes many deaths among natives’, Rom’s first dangerous snake was reluctantly taken back to the wild and released.

It wasn’t long before schoolkids and community people started bringing the occasional snake to him, usually the burrowing uropeltids or shieldtail snakes that were then

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common in the hills, and sometimes the mildly venomous green pit viper, locally known as the banana viper. Once a friend's eagerness to bring him a snake ended badly. Bill Brannen returned from a hike with a severely swollen and painful hand and related how he had tried to stuff a fat pit viper into his water canteen! Understandably, it turned and bit him on the finger. One of the boy scout friends with him decided to try incising the bite with a hunting knife and this treatment ended up causing more problems than the bite.

Probably the main reason Rom gained a certain dubious notoriety at Kodai School was his pet python. Bought from an animal dealer at Crawford Market in Bombay, this 2-metre snake became a gentle, much-handled pet. Technically, of course, no pets were allowed at school. But the python somehow slipped by for several years, as part of the empty luggage under the dormitory beds.

Some of the things Rom and his friends did in school make me wonder how they survived their youth. In the spear and bow-and-arrow phase, they discovered the local blacksmith who turned out superb spearheads and arrowheads, based on designs copied from Tarzan comics and pictures of native Americans in history books. There were only a couple of casualties during this period. But the fireworks, bomb and rocket phase was to give a few of them burns to remember and some really close calls. They made pipe cannons to shoot marbles way out into the lake, waterproof bombs to blast fish and, eventually, rockets that

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actually went up. They experimented with Molotov cocktails, thanks to Rom's discovery of a World War II pamphlet called *Bomber's Handbook*, and produced everything short of nitroglycerine in the chemistry lab.

During holidays in Bombay, he visited BNHS to read up on the snakes of Palani Hills and to make contact with naturalists and taxidermists. It was here that he first met Baba and Sálím Mamoo. Rom was impressed by the fact that their interest in nature had developed into their careers. At BNHS, he learnt about bird collection and skin mounting, which was becoming a favourite activity. As it had with both Sálím Mamoo and Baba, BNHS was to play a big role in encouraging his interest in ecology. And in Kodai, the Fathers at the Sacred Heart College at Shenbaganur helped him hone his taxidermy skills and occasionally let him use their old black powder guns.

When Rom graduated from Kodai School, he was sixteen. By then, there were two more children in the family, Neel and Nina. Both were friends of mine at the Bombay International School (BIS), of which Doris as well as my parents were founders. Neel was in my class; more interested in music than homework (or even classwork). His ready wit and charming smile got him out of many tight spots with teachers and the principal. The two families, Rom's and mine, were coming together, through the BNHS, BIS and the wider natural history network of the city.

Rom didn't feel ready for college on the other side of

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the world, and Kamaladevi arranged for him to work as an apprentice with a taxidermist in Mysore. He moved to Vani Vilas Mohalla there, learning from and helping out at V. Pradaniah and Sons. They prepared and mounted a wide range of animals, from king cobras to tiger cubs. An airgun and other school possessions were sold in order to buy a 1941 Triumph motorbike, a 350cc single with mechanical forks and very little spring, but the kidneys are tough at that age. This mobility enabled Rom to make frequent trips to the forests near Gundlupet and Chamarajanagar at times when there was not much work at the taxidermist. His patron here was his namesake, Brother Romulus of Guntapuram, a jolly Franciscan priest, who later started a well-known boys' town.

He loved being at Brother Romulus's farm, where he had several tasks. One was crop protection. Surrounded by forest, anything grown in the fields was quickly devoured by wild boar, deer, porcupine or elephant. He and a few others kept these animals off the crops with the help of a black Labrador and Brother Romulus's two rifles and shotgun; in the process, they ended up being the main suppliers of fresh meat to the farm and its neighbours. Luckily, Rom never shot an elephant and missed the one leopard he sat up for. But plenty of spotted deer, sambar and blackbuck fell, and the gratitude of the farmers always balanced any twinge of remorse.

Those early days with Brother Romulus greatly increased Rom's confidence and skills in the forest. The watchers had

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numerous encounters with elephants, both by day and night, which taught him the right measure of caution. Meetings with bear, tiger and leopard helped develop a balanced, careful curiosity for the jungle. It was in the forests of Thalavadi and Guntapuram, now almost gone, that he found his first wild python. He was by himself and the snake was too big to tackle. Rom regretfully watched it disappear slowly into the network of caves and crevices that were its home.

In Mysore, he started spending as much time at the Mysore Zoo as he did at the taxidermist and got to know a lot of the animals well. He made friends with Dieter Rinkel, a young zoo keeper from Hamburg Zoo, and helped him feed and care for the seven young elephants he was taking back to Germany. But the forest trips continued and knapsack on back, Rom would go off camping on his own for several days at a time. Unlike most mothers, Doris realized the importance of restraining her fears and anxiety. It was probably this one year's total freedom among forests and wildlife that created the conservationist he was to become.

Meanwhile, my family's journey in this area was also unfolding. No one was catching pythons or camping in the rainforest, but my parents were now recognized pioneers in the world of conservation, which was becoming a common word in the Indian lexicon. Baba was often away on bird surveys with Sálím Mamoo, and the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* had become a springboard for many birders who evolved into important players in the conservation scene

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and, today, speak of the vital role the *Newsletter* played in their lives. A combination of science and popular articles, it was accessible to many levels of ornithologists, from amateurs to serious ‘listers’.

I would hear from Neel – mostly during maths class, which was Greek to us both – about his brother Breezy’s visits. With his long blond hair, jeans and khadi kurta, Rom attracted catcalls and greetings on the Bombay sidewalks, usually ‘Hello, Hippy!’ When Neel was old enough to join him on his jaunts, the call became plural: ‘Hello, Hippiss!’

But now it was time for college in the States, to say goodbye to the family and head off on his own to the University of Wyoming. A tough call at eighteen, but with the consolation that there was a bunch of interesting rattlesnakes waiting for him, including the prairie rattler. While at school, Rom had written to some of the big names in American herpetology and received encouraging replies, even from the snake guru Raymond Ditmars himself. Catching and selling snakes was becoming a business among the snake community in the States, which was growing apace. Non-venomous species like milk snakes and DeKay’s were easily tamed and sold to the pet trade and venomous snakes were sold to laboratories for antivenom production and medical research. Not a bad pastime to look forward to, during holidays and after (and even during!) classes.