paaLiiva pakshii

Domesticated Birds[1]

Introduction

The following is a loose translation of an essay “Paaleev Pakshee” (Domesticated Birds) by Purushottam Lakshman Deshpande. P. L. Deshpande needs no introduction to Marathi-speaking people; his figure towers over the entire spectrum of Marathi theater, films, short stories of the past 30-odd years. His work is peppered with an irreverent nostalgia for life as it used to be and is delivered as if by an intimate friend that we, the readers, have grown up with. A total mastery over the Marathi language, a deep insight into the Maharashtrian psyche, and a style of humour that is at once incisive and gentle, are the tools he uses to spin his craft.

As ardent followers of the “Pu-La” (as he is called) brand of humour, we have taken upon ourselves the task of translating “Paaleev Pakshee.” We are curious to see if his art is universal, and appeals to non-Marathi speaking audiences as well. Of course, we may never satisfy that curiosity; if you don’t like it - it may not neccessarily mean that the original words are provincial; it may instead indicate that we failed to convey the universality in this giant’s writing. Yet, at the risk of failing, we present this offering. We welcome your comments.

AjitDongre@hotmail.com (Ajit Dongre)
Ranju@RajOnline.Net (Raj Ganesan)

---

[1]Send corrections to AjitDongre@hotmail.com (Ajit Dongre) Ranju@RajOnline.Net (Raj Ganesan)

Domesticated Birds (paaLiiv pakshii)

The Crow (Kaawla)

The crow was the first animal I encountered as a child. Even though I grew up in the city, I never felt robbed of closer contact with the grandeur of Nature, nor resented the fact that I was introduced to Her by way of this particularly homely among Her creatures.
A nursery rhyme I learned as a schoolboy comes to mind :

“Caws the Crow, ’I’m black, you bet’,
For a white bird, look at the Egret”

[“kaavaLaa mhaNe mii kaaLaa
paa.nDharaa asato to bagaLaa, disatase”]

(In those days, children’s poems were called rhymes; they had not been renamed “Literature for the Young”.) As a child, I encountered the crow every day, but had to await Independence for a glimpse of the egret - they must have been scarce then. My lack of enthusiasm for the Bird Kingdom was obviously a direct result of being introduced to it via this rather pedestrian member.

As a child, I spent a lot of time closely observing the crow. It is definitely a bird born in relative destitution; yet, in the language of Bombay, it appears “bloody insolent” (”Saala Aakhdu!”). Its appearance evokes a fashion affected a few years ago by some Bombayites to have their collars starched really stiff. Part of this affectation was then to look around themselves with stiff movements of the neck. The crow has this exact proclivity. (Because of this, even the most modest person in a black suit has appeared to me to be conceited; like the -black- crow.)

The crow is clearly not domesticated. Only once have I ever seen a crow in a cage - in a zoo in London. There it sat, with all the aplomb of a parrot, this crow, in a cage that proudly displayed the sign “Indian Crow.” It made me think of some especially provincial Indian in traditional garb, sitting alongside a group of sahibs. It spied me from the corner of its eyes and immediately chose to ignore me from then on. This is quite typical of other Indians in London; once they notice a fellow Indian in their vicinity, they act as though the other doesn’t exist! Actually, I was mildly pleased that, among all other exotic fauna, this common Indian bird had at least secured for itself a legitimate place in that sahibee zoo. Aside from that, the crow, unlike some other birds, has never aspired to be a pet, and thus is no foe of mine. Inherently conceited the crow may well be; yet it is a bird of modest aspirations. Its crowing is intended to be exactly what it sounds like: a "caw", not a pretense at human speech.

The sombre expression on its face, not to be found in any other bird, is that of a wise person who has been around: weathered a few monsoons, if you will. A close cousin, the kakakua (we need to find out what this is in English), on the other hand, has an expression of a retired High Court judge. In fact, if you stare long enough at a kakakua, you get the distinct feeling that it is going to break out into addressing "The Honourable Members of the Jury!" The crow, on the other hand, is the quintessential lawyer. When I see a group of them on a fence or a wooden bar, I am reminded of a coterie of old law hands exchanging favourite "bar" stories. It is said that when one crow in a flock dies, the rest of them gather as in a wake and make lawyerly speeches extolling the departed crow's "crow"ning deeds.

I suspect in olden days, the crow must have played messenger. Why else would there be ditties like :
"Fly away, Crow Bird, with news of Here (1)
Take my gold, and journey on there" (2)

[(1) "Ud jaa re kagawa, leke sandeswa"
(2) "Ud Ud re kaau tuze sonyanee madhavina pau"]

The crows in my life have never lived up to these lofty expectations. But, in their defense, neither have they done much to deserve a reputation as freeloaders. And yet, I have not infrequently seen a crow perched on the back of a water buffalo. Perhaps birds occasionally tire of flying and look for a "free ride!"

Superstition has it that the cawing of a crow on your window-sill foretells a visit by an unexpected guest. If that were true, the majority of Bombayites, eking out a living in room-and-a-half flats would have driven the crow to extinction. Unexpected visitor indeed! They would rather be free of living visitors than allowing the species to perpetuate and guarantee salvation for their dead ancestors!

Though undomesticated, the crow occupies a special place in Hindu religious rituals: it is instrumental in the rite for the deceased. Rarely, though, do these rites conclude as briefly as they are supposed to:

"The pinda (balls of rice, symbolizing the departed soul) were arranged. The crow, (symbolizing the ancestors, visiting from Heaven to release the the soul from the body) descended and touched the balls of rice. The soul was satisfied, and attained salvation. People returned home in peace."

Instead, inevitably, there are complications. Take my friend's grandmother, for instance. There was no earthly reason for the crows not quickly to touch the balls of rice. The old woman had lived to be a ripe nonagenarian before closing her eyes for that final nap. The crows, however, wouldn't stray ANYWHERE near the rice balls. The members of the family were nonplussed. Why was the old soul dissatisfied? One could hardly promise her "We will take good care of your children," since her only son had been happily enjoying his post office pension for over twenty years and appeared healthy enough to continue to do so for another twenty! Not just her son, even her grandchildren and great-grandchildren were all uniformly healthy and well-cared for. Finally, someone had the wisdom of promising, "Grandma, we will NOT give away your valued shawl to the used-clothes-lady unless we get an extra large pickle jar AND a set of cups-and-saucers in return." The crows immediately descended down on the balls of rice! Until that incident, I had not realized how closely the household crow monitored family matters. Having observed your family so intimately, I guess it is natural that the crow play such a commanding role at such a crucial time. And at this moment of salvation, when you can even hear the "hunger crows" crowing in the priest's stomach (in anticipation of the post-cremation meal), the crow is decidely the star.

The Sparrow (Chimnee)

A reference to the sparrow almost inevitably follows a description of the crow; perhaps this is because the two words rhyme well together? The two don't really have much in common, save their urban environment, their large populations, and their lower-middle-class status in the Bird Hierarchy. Neither has the luxury of pecking at pomegranate seeds in fancy cages, like the parrot. Each speaks its own humble dialect and does not aspire to parrot people-speak. And they cannot afford to be picky about their diets either. "We snack on guavas ripened with care, Or perish if given lesser fare," [Peroo khaau kinva maroo"] is not among the principles they live by, as it is for the higher-class parrot.

The sparrow is a notch above the crow, socio-economically speaking. Mr. and Mrs. Sparrow reside under eaves of middle-class homes. They even engage in mildly risque' necking. This is not quite unlike the teenage children of clerks, trying to re-enact scenes out of monthly periodicals that they devour surreptitiously from free-of-charge libraries. The crow's class, in comparison, is clearly lower: that of a menial labourer who has to get up in pre-dawn darkness, wash down cheap left-over meals before hurrying on to his long day of work. The sparrow is white-collar, not just physically, but figuratively as well – somewhat more like the Lower Division clerk than the blue-collar worker. It can even afford a yearly vacation inland to the North to pick on field corn. And with the husbands off to work, the ladies even get together for their club meetings to cackle, presumably over women's issues.

The sparrow's nest may be nothing to crow about;

nevertheless, it retains the dignity of a proper haven for the nuclear sparrow family. The crow's nest, on the other hand, is clearly the slum-dweller's make-shift hovel. The crow can never summon the sparrow's boldness to carve out an abode for itself atop someone's ceiling fan, inside a light shade, or in the foyer of a drawing room. It must possess a strange inferiority complex which prevents it ¿from rushing in, unannounced, into someone's home, the way sparrows and pigeons do. Sparrows, especially the females, are obviously a liberated species; they have no compunctions about venturing out of the kitchen and into the workplace. Unlike the feminist sparrows, crow females are never seen in public; I don't even know if they are black or white! I surmise they're black; otherwise wouldn't we have seen an occasional white crow?

Barring the crows and sparrows frequenting the view directly outside our windows and the eaves-dwelling, purring pigeons living off the granaries at the grocers' shops on the ground floor, you might say The Bird had long since flown the coop of my childhood. I'm not claiming there were no birds in the skies of my childhood; but the microscopic windows of the high-rise chawls of Bombay my peers and I grew up in allowed little view of the sky, let alone of any birds that may have populated it.

<u>The Pigeon (Paarva/Kabutar)</u>

The pigeon has got to be the happiest, not just among birds, but among all urban animals. Their twin purposes in life are to make extraordinary purring, guttural sounds – and to make love. They never have to worry where their next meal is coming from. If the graingrocers offered all the grain they routinely broadcast for the pigeon population to the Bombay citizenry instead, the blessings bestowed on the grocers could easily guarantee their salvation after death. The pigeon is clearly the luckiest among all birds, enjoying "pet" privileges without the encumberance of a cage.

In my mind, speech patterns of Parsis among all the idioms of the Indian peninsula most closely resemble the throaty purrings of pigeons. For that matter the OTHER behavior of pigeons isn't unlike the Parsis' either!

<u>The Parrot (Popat)</u>

Among caged urban animals, the parrot is indubitably the most popular. You'd think I would share this ubiquitous attraction for the parrot. Ironically, it is the parrot that has been single-wingedly responsible for leaving me completely cold toward all domestic pets. Let me explain.

That the parrot can make utterances like "Polly wants a cracker," in my opinion is a huge flight of fancy. This claim is like that made of the Deccan Queen, which, according to its fans, huffs-and-puffs out, along its winding, mountainous journey, a rhyme in Marathi which may be translated as:
Why do we do it? Well, it's a living!
With the Ghaats our witness, it's so thrilling!

["kashaasaaThii poTaasaaThii, kha.nDaaLyaachyaa ghaaTaasaaThii"

If you could prove that a mere railway train really can voice such a profound life principle, I could be persuaded not just that Polly expresses his gluttony so comprehensibly, but even that Polly is then capable of going on to describe the Rama Rajya that will ensue when Polly gets his cracker. But, of course, both these phenomena are woven out of the same whole cloth. I've seen many a parrot in my time. And the plain truth is that its so-called speech consists of nothing more than screeching several high- pitched monosyllables in a single breath.

I will admit this: the parrot is no ugly duckling. It is evocative of an Indian Apollo just stepping out of a paan shop, balancing a juicy Banarasi Maghai full of tobacco on his tongue, wearing a Kashi pandya's [priest] lime-green shawl, splitting apart a bright yellow guava – it is a sight truly magnificent to behold! Even in a flock flying over a mango or guava grove, the parrot is equally attractive. Little wonder, then, that its dazzling red-green color scheme makes him so popular. But to say, "It talks, it can say it all," is an unmitigated travesty of reality. It is a totally baseless accusation.

Frankly, the parrot is not the guilty party here. The real culprit is not the parrot, or any particular pet, for that matter, it is its master. Undomesticated as they have remained, the crow and the sparrow don't pose us with this problem. The pigeon, even though it continually breaks bold new ground in walking precariously close to the line separating propriety and downright obscenity, finds no fans praising its open-mindedness. Therefore, these birds elicit no enmity from me - perhaps an occasional pang of envy for what the pigeons get away with in bright sunlight.

For all the utterances of these birds have made over the years, no one has heard them break into human speech. Never has it been claimed, for instance, that the sparrow peeked in from its perch in the eaves, and intoned, "Well, Auntie, are you done with the pooja yet or not, chirp-chirp!" Nor of the crow, to have inquired, "So how's the old fight with the asthma, Balwant Rao, is it winning, or are you?" Nor is Mr. Pigeon ever assumed to have flirted with Mrs. Pigeon using words like, "How about it, Darrrling?" The parrot's master, on the other hand, hears all manner of human speech each time the parrot screams its ear-splitting cry. Fact is, having dined on germinated chickpeas, guava, green chili pepper, etc., in its cage, the poor parrot is has no other choice but to sit quietly like a Brahmin humming his vow of celibacy and truth.["Brahmacharya satya asteya"]

While one never sees a female crow, it is easy to conclude, ¿from their increasing numbers, that crows clearly come in both sexes. But one never sees a he-and-she pair of parrots sharing a cage. Vignettes from Marathi off-color folk theater ("laavanee") I've run into suggest that any dalliance on the part of the parrot is typically not a straight-and-narrow one, with a female of its own species; rather - an unholy one with the myna bird [from references to "a pair of Raaghu-Myna"].

I incurred the wrath of our immediate neighbors early in my childhood by stating, unequivocally, "The parrot cannot utter a single letter of human speech!" Their parrot, Raaghu, would utter some small variant of the single syllable, "Kkirrrrr!" They, on the other hand, claimed him capable of the complete gamut of human sounds. My child's mind was totally unprepared to interpret its "Kkirrrrr!," screamed while snapping its tail on the cage perch, as, "Well, Ganpat Rao, are you through with your lunch? What was the menu? Puran Polee (sweet roti)? Wonderful! Your Mrs. is such a wonderful cook, I must say!"

I had studied this parrot in great detail. You know, there are two kinds of cross-eyed people: those whose eyes want constantly to meet at the bridge of the nose, and those whose two eyes are constantly attempting to walk away toward the ear nearest them. The parrot is the latter kind of cross-eyed. I never liked the parrot's demeanor for this reason, as I always feared such people to be constantly angry. It's possible that the parrot, too, with its self-imposed dual vow of celibacy and truth, not to mention his diet of chilies, must always be in a bad mood. Plus his glance also suggests a certain mistrust of the people he sees.

I used to watch my neighbors' parrot for hours on end. His "Kkirrrrr!" occasionally felt like an expletive directed at me. My neighbors would hear something quite the opposite. "Oh, listen! Hear how sweetly he takes his vow to be truthful!! [Satyavade vachanala naatha]"

In retrospect, I think I understand how inevitable it was for our good neighbor to accord her parrot with such sonorous capacities. She claimed to be a student of music herself, and could often be found squatting in front of the harmonium, trying unsuccessfully to coax one of those non-existent notes out of it which only her wretched throat could engender! But even her husband, who had no similar inclination, insisted that his pet was capable of reciting myriad Sanskrit stotras. In stark contrast to their faith in the parrot's predilection for human speech, I continued steadfastly to assert, like a child Galileo, the exact opposite claim. Wasn't it Galileo who was executed for claiming, contrary to prevailing dogma, that the Earth either goes, or does not go, around the Sun (or maybe the other way around)? That's the man I had chosen to emulate. Even my mother tried to cajole me into biting my tongue – and letting the neighbor's parrot keep its tongue, so to speak. But I was just not to be convinced. Each testimonial of Raghu's talent from the neighbors was followed by my loud and vehement denial that I had heard nothing but "Kkirrrrr!"

Finally, my father was forced to move out of our flat in that chawl. In those pre-inflation, pre-congestion days, it was viable, even for a family of our modest means, to find a new flat for such a minor reason. Of course, before committing ourselves to the new location, we made absolutely sure that there were no cages hanging anywhere in the chawl. I remember my father counting out into the hands of the landlord's assistant not one, but two months' advance rent – the grand total of twelve rupees!

Now you know the seminal influence in my childhood that contributed to my lack of respect for pets and those who keep them.

I'm aware in the main of only three household pets, the parrot, the cat, and the dog. (I did run into a case of a man who kept a monkey for a pet. But both the master and the pet were always so bent on besting each other in clownish acts, that I was never sure who had kept whom.) I've never heard of someone keeping a bird such as the eagle. The only form of such birds that I have seen is: stuffed. I do remember reading in History about some Moghul king who went about his royal business with a peregrine falcon on his wrist. This bird is reputed to go after other birds and kill them. Goes to prove that it isn't just humans who will gladly step on their fellowmen just to be in the good graces of princes and politicians.

More exotic birds such as the peacock I only saw in the zoo. (Of course, having stayed in the zoo for years, that peacock had long since stopped doing its dance.) Fathers took their children to the Queen's Garden zoo in my childhood. (Our teacher, on the other hand, was more the slave-driver type; certainly not the type to afford his charges anything remotely resembling fun.) Not once did I see a peacock dance at the zoo. I grew up believing that a peacock feather pressed between the pages of a book causes the owner to acquire the knowledge within. I showed my peacock feather every page of my Mathematics book in the course of one year. All it gave me in return was the round shape of its eye for the marks in the annual exam – a big zero. I was forced ultimately to conclude that both the peacock dance and the power of its feather were both figments of someone's imagination. I can well recollect the peacock meandering in that zoo, with the sweep of its luxuriant broom of a tail. Meandering, but never dancing. It was like the more limited pleasure of watching some world-famous Bharat Natyam dancer–not pirouetting on a stage–but, discovered in a chance encounter, gulping down idlis at an Udipi restaurant. Or a glamorous movie queen seen spooning out chutney at a dinner gathering.

Now of course we need to be careful what we say about the peacock. It has acquired the status of the National Bird. Its song is in fact much more tolerable than the "Kkirrrrr!" of the parrot, but I'm afraid that, with its newfangled government responsibilities, it might forget its own natural song and instead parrot the P. R. its official sponsors might demand of it.

The ???? (Kakakua)

Only once or twice have I crossed paths with the well- connected kakakua. His lily-white, top-notched demeanour reflects its obvious good breeding. No petty cries escape his high-bred throat. He takes his august position on his perch, in deep contemplation of some profound truths out of a John Stuart Mill or Spencer, like a true philosopher. Conversely, the kakakua has a distant African cousin called the jangma or kusuku which is supposed to imitate human speech to the letter! A man down the block from where I lived displayed this bird in a cage in his verandah. Don't we occasionally encounter a well-bred family with some poor, ugly cousins? Well, the jangma or kusuku is like that. His dissonant cries sounded like someone engaging any passing stranger in cheap, idle gossip. "Hey, you. Yes, you with the hair sticking out of your nose. Isn't that the Desai's 16-year-old you're with? Sure has blossomed well, hasn't she, if you know what I mean???" By and by, the old grandfather living in that house passed away and, curiously, the bird stopped voicing its illicit inquiries. That was the first "playback" I'd heard in my life! I remember the other people in the house, crocodile tears in their eyes, marveling at the devotion for the departed soul which muted their pet's speech. Most of the neighborhood, of course, had understood the codger to be the dirty old man he really was.

The Nightingale (Kokila)

Sanskrit poets have consistently spoken fondly of the nightingale and its musical talent; however, I have known no accounts of its domestication. This possibly owes to people's uncertainty about whether its the nightingale or its close relative ???? that is the real musical genius in the family. As misconceptions go, the nightingale's capacity to reproduce the musical scale perfectly rivals the parrot's purported proclivity for human speech. Of course, the poets are a whole different species of animal, with a world view incomprehensible to you and me. Their appreciation of the nightingale may thus be ascribed to the poetic license they often utilize in their work to justify flights of fancy they routinely take.

The Swan (Hans)

Among birds capable of flight, there are many who, despite their beauty, have remained undomesticated. No one since Damayanti (the heroine of the great novel by Kalidasa, ????) appears to have really wanted to mess with the swan. This bird, too, like the koyal, has found a serious place for itself in the world of poetry. Its diet is said to consist of pearl dust and saffron, the champagne-and-caviar of the birds, if you will. For its abode, it must have a cool Alpine lake; the turgid pond which its provincial cousin, the duck, floats blithely in, just won't do for the swan. The swan for me is the most favorite among all the birds. If ever I must keep a bird for a pet, I'll keep a swan. Even almighty god broke the mold after he created the swan. He made the duck, he fashioned the egret, he even worked on the long flexible neck of the ostrich; none achieved the magnificence of the royal swan. Nala, who sought to slay the swan, must surely have been possessed by Kali [not the goddess Kaali, but Kali as in Kali Yuga], just as the fish occasionally enter and possess the nala [tap] in Bombay. Why else would he want to squeeze such a beauteous neck? Truth be told, it's Raghunath Pandit, who translated the XXXX for Marathi readers, who is the real villain. He is the one who makes this royal bird assume such a lowly profile and plead for his life with King Nala in the words of a common clerk begging vacation from his boss, "Sir, my mother's ill and the wife is due any time. Can I please get two days off, please, Sir?" How insulting to a such a noble bird! The real Royal Swan must have said to Nala, "O Nala Raj, don't you dare desecrate my white mantle by touching it with your filthy hands lest I have to suffer the long trip to Maanasarovar to cleanse it. This garb can't tolerate the treatment meted out in the putrid water of your suspect water system, it needs a Special Wash. This Royal Messenger brings you word from Damayanti, who happens to have succumbed to your graces, whatever they may be. Are you the real Nala Raj, or merely the plumber in your capital's municipality?"

It's hard to mention, let alone discuss, any other, lesser, birds after dwelling on the royal swan. Besides, the principal topic of discussion is domesticated birds, which practically begins and ends with the parrot.

The End
