

COMPILED BY RAUF ALI

BITSIANS RUNNING WILD

BITSians have been known to pursue alternate careers. Movies, music, art, journalism, politics, social work. But nothing is quite as unusual as the career that a handful of BITSians have taken up, working in forests with monkeys, crocodiles, elephants, tigers and more. What is common to each of them is the passion for their work, and the fulfillment of their careers. These are their stories.



RAUF ALI & THE LIONTAILED MACAQUE

(72S04425)

A spur of the moment decision took me to the BITSAA concert in Bangalore last July. Few memories remain from the alcoholic haze most of us were in. Old friends whom I met twenty-five years after graduation were surprised and amused to find that one of their numbers was different. He was not either a manager or an engineer. Well, actually was doing a very weird thing. I was a wildlife biologist! Thinking about it, I came up with six

more names, of people from BITS who had opted for the same career. I was able to contact four, and they responded. They have told their stories in their own words, with varying degrees of effort, and with the occasional annotation

where I know something.

First, about myself. I grew up in a family of zoologists, but never considered it a career. Joined BITS in the unassigned category, in those rare years when the experiment was tried. Found a couple of Ph.D. types who were induced to come out of the closet and go bird watching, usually in the thorn forests outside the campus. In my second year, I decided I didn't want to be an engineer, and all this molecular bio stuff was boring. Luckily B.Sc. was offered for the last time....

I started working on the highly endangered liontailed macaque in an area now known as the Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (as a Bombaywala let

loose in rural Tamil Nadu for the first time, you can imagine the problem with these words!). I also did some work on bonnet monkeys at the same time and found I had so much info on them that it made sense to write up my Ph.D. dissertation on them. Which I did at Bristol in England, followed by research assistantships at the Smithsonian Institution and then Harvard.

I then made the mistake of coming back to India, and found myself the pawn in a lot of political games. This is all university education in India seems to be about. Three universities later (Madurai- I resigned; IISc- I quit noisily; Pondicherry - I was sacked after abusing the Vice-Chancellor), and after having the exalted status of Professor, I began working for NGO's. I'm now trustee of one. In the meantime, I've worked on forestry economics, protected area management, gibbon behaviour, birds, plants, and coral reef socio-economics, besides hopefully helping a number of young reprobates to get started (see below).

Most recently I've spent the last couple of years in the Andaman Islands looking at various environmental problems there. I hope to start a research programme there soon.

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JAYASHREE RATNAM & THE CROCODILES

A dreary PS2 in a grey New Delhi, a couple of hikes in the Garhwal Himalayas and a trip to Corbett National park, and I had the epiphany of my life: being a computer scientist was clearly not for me. I returned home to Chennai to reexamine my choices, and decided to work towards joining the Master's program at the Salim Ali School of Ecology in Pondicherry. I passed the entrance exam, but whether I would have made it through the interview had not Dr. Rauf Ali, one of the interview panelists, chosen to do no more than merely raise an enquiring eyebrow at my less-than-heavy CGPA, will always be a question in my mind. (She

would have, actually. I saw a BITS mark sheet and went, without even realizing it, into vicious ragging mode, much to the shock of my colleagues on the interview panel-RA) In what followed, I graduated with a master's under Rauf's aegis, trained as a behavioral ecologist. It was my good fortune to wander the forests of southern India and the Andaman islands in search of birds and lizards during this time. (Well, one type of lizard...a gecko actually. It was bright green and hung out on coconut leaves-RA) This was followed by a year of studying captive monitor lizards at the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust in Mammallapuram (I Do recommend a visit - its denizens of open-mouthed, apparently indifferent crocodiles and turtles in fact have a fascinating evolutionary history and resilience). From there to the cold northern climes of upstate

New York for a PhD program at Syracuse University, where I continued to train as a behavioral & evolutionary ecologist and conservation biologist. In a truly strange series of coincidences, I ended up studying decision-making behavior in bonnet macaques in the Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve in southern India for my dissertation; the coincidence being that I studied the same troop of bonnets that Rauf had studied in 1976 for his PhD. Indeed, we believe one of the females he

had studied was still alive, albeit very old at the time of my study 22 years later. Her thoughts on the predilections of some graduates from Pilani for staring curiously at her for hours, I am sad to report I don't know. As of the current moment, I am a research scientist at the Natural Resource Ecology Labs of Colorado State University. I now study patterns of herbivory and the morpho-physiological adaptations of trees in the semi-arid and arid savannas of Africa. This is a necessary detour- any biologist must needs see Africa- after all, it is the cradle- and an incredibly beautiful one. I imagine I will eventually be back in the forests of southern India, hopefully to study and work in them for the rest of my life.

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MAHESH SANKARAN & THE TIGERS

I boarded the bus for that all too familiar trip from Pilani to ISBT for the last time in 1988. M.Sc.(Tech) Computer Science is what the degree said. I signed on the first dotted line proffered my way and plunged headlong into the fiefdom of corporate overlords.(And also the world of sleazy bars in Pondy where I got to know him and Jayu well-RA) Two years and as many manic bosses later (most didn't like being called fools to their faces, a disease all of us seem to have picked up-RA), I was through with the corporate world. A hop across the pond found me in the cotton-pickin' South, pursuing a Master's degree in Wildlife Sciences at Auburn University, Alabama. Between prolonged periods spent at the local watering-hole, I worked on

developing spatially explicit models to predict extinction probabilities and patterns of gene-flow in endangered small mammal populations. From there it was on to the snowy expanses of upstate New York for a Ph.D. at Syracuse University. For my dissertation, I worked at the Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve in south India, investigating the potential causes and consequences of recent herbivore and predator declines in the reserve. (This is nonsense. He lit forest fires and watched what happened to the plants afterwards-RA) I am now a Research Scientist at the Natural Resource Ecology Laboratory at Colorado State University, having spent a year in the interim as a post-doctoral researcher at the Imperial College in London. My research focuses on understanding how species extinctions within communities influence their subsequent ability to function and recycle water, nutrients and energy. I will eventually return to work in

the forests of the Western Ghats. In the meantime, I am studying savanna-grassland ecosystems in Africa - Kenya and South Africa in particular.

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MADHU RAO & LOGGING

I had always wanted to be an ecologist and as a keen outdoor person wanted to ensure I chose a career where I spent most of my time in the wild. I completed the Bio.Sciences degree at BITS as a start. I dropped computer science as a dual degree much to everyone's horror. I was always quite keen to follow something other than the usual professions and wildlife, nature and the like have been a long-time favourite. So, I guess I am fortunate to be actually making a living out of doing something I really enjoy and believe in. I initially did a MS in Conservation Biology at Duke Univ. researching orangutans and selective logging in Indonesia followed by a Ph.D. researching forest fragmentation in south eastern Venezuela. Following that I became assistant director of the WCS Asia Program based out of New York designed and managed projects in about 12 Asian countries. I am currently Associate Conservationist with WCS and working on projects in Burma and South East Asia. It has been a fun ride all the way and I cannot think of anything else I'd rather be doing.

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ARUN VENKATRAMAN & ELEPHANTS



What do wasps, Asiatic wild dogs and elephants have in common? Nothing at all, apart from the wacky spectacle of a Wonky working on all these diverse taxa through a series of events that were actually quite connected. I was one of few BITSIANs who steadfastly refused to do a dual degree, despite considerable family and peer pressure, preferring to pass out with a M.Sc. Bio. degree. Armed with superficial wisdom in everything from circuit theory to the dynamics of social change (I perfected cracking make-ups there!) and unable to compete with curricula trained Molecular Biologists, I opted to do a Ph.D at the Centre for Ecological Sciences, IISc, Bangalore. I then spent 5 years watching social wasps do everything from copulating to evicting colony queens! And did produce a reasonably sound Ph.D at the end of this (fortunately visits by my illustrious senior (Rauf)

were far and few then, as it took days to recover from them!). During the last year of my Ph.D, the call of the wild hit hard abetted by a nascent group working on wildlife ecology at CES and frequent trips with a

hopelessly teutonic German primatologist. This call has actually persisted through much of my life and while at BITS, resulted in a trip to Sariska with a despondent group of batch-mates. Memories of this trip include 7 of us spending a night in a hide with, what turned out to be a deranged homosexual guide. My enthusiasm for wildlife fortuitously did not dampen.

As wild dogs or dholes are possibly the most social mammal known within the country and offered immense challenges in their study and conservation, I promptly declined all post-doc offers abroad and aided by a grant from the government began working on these elusive animals for the next four years in the Mudumalai Sanctuary, Tamil Nadu. So far this has been scientifically the most

rewarding and exciting period of my life. At the end of this, family needs did prevail and I had to move back to Bangalore for my son's education and my wife's apparent sanity (actually she now wants to go back to the wilds and is diligently constructing our house outside Bandipur Tiger Reserve). Around this time I was offered a position to direct scientific programmes at the newly created Asian Elephant Research and Conservation Centre at CES, Bangalore and I was there till August, 2003. The job was great and allowed much travel to elephants habitats in India, Southeast Asia and Africa.

The halcyon days in Bangalore were however short-lived. I was selected to head a new programme for South Asia under the Convention for International Trade on Endangered Species called MIKE (Monitoring of Illegal Killing of Elephants). I presently provide technical advice and build capacity for the implementation of this programme by the Government's of Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. I live in New Delhi that has been aptly described as a dark and dreary place by a contributor to this feature. But thanks to work-related travel frequently get out to sunnier climes.

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