

Stones of Silence

Journeys in the Himalaya

G.Schaller

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Schaller is a noted field-biologist. I first came across him reading a preliminary piece in the New Yorker by the nature writer Matthiessen about his quest for the snow leopard, a piece to be extended to a book which I consequently acquired. I vividly recall the encounter as described by Matthiessen, that they had so much to talk about and talked at such intensity that he worried that they would not have anything left to talk about during their continued companionship on their trek together to a remote part of Nepal. The mission of Schaller was described to find the missing link between sheep and goats. I also learned later that Schaller was not so enamored by the book by Matthiessen and that this book was a response. This however, seems unlikely, not only because the latter is treated respectfully, although reading between the lines there are some indications of friction, but also because the common trek with Matthiessen makes up just one chapter of the book, be it the ultimate one, and in some sense the summit of a decade of explorations around the edges of the Indian subcontinent to study vanishing populations of wild goats and sheep.

Schaller is a scientist, well conscious of his status as a scientist and that it not only gives his quests a goal but also serves a purpose transcending the mere personal and thus lends an entitlement which cannot really be questioned. Science is not only objective, but the epitome of objectivity, at least this is how it is seen by the general public. When Schaller observes a herd he not only notes it but counts its members, making a division into males and females, grown-ups and youngsters, and reports it. This may seem pedantic, even as a parody on his role as a scientist, but it actually makes the report more varied, guarding against monotony, and far from being a tic it testifies to the duties of a systematic observation because after all one of his goals is to make a census, of gauging the prevalence of different populations, in order to make judgments on their vitality short-term and long-term, to decide whether stable or threatened. As to being on the verge of extinction this is a negative observation, essentially a conclusion based on the non-existence of observations. Schaller is like all zoologists well-schooled in evolutionary theory, although, in my opinion, as most students of it liable to come up with speculative ad-hoc solutions, when there are so many alternative scenarios to consider. Evolution, for one thing, is more than optimization. Gauging the relative prevalence of young animals he draws conclusions. When the fraction of the young is low, it is an indication of a population in dire straits, of a dearth of fodder from which to derive necessary sustenance. Not enough food to nurture fetuses in the womb, not enough to produce enough milk for the lambs and kids being born, meaning that the latter are more liable to succumb. Paradoxically he notes, that in a population at the margins, not only is the proportion of the old higher, but individuals tend to live longer. In other words what is bad for the population as such

may be beneficial for the individual. Schaller proposes an explanation along the lines that in the case of a lack of food, individuals save on energy, thus they do not engage as vigorously in fights and copulation, their periods of ruts being subdued. This may serve the population at large badly, as opposed to the individual member, which may reach higher ages (as testified by growth rings on their horns). Such explorations based on numbers and Darwinian ideas, or such that govern the later, may give the author some satisfaction, but only a limited one. What really excites him, and turns him into a field biologist not merely an academic arm-chair one, is the actual observation of animals, to see them on close, undisturbed in the wild, and be a witness to their actual behavior. Although his missions concern the genera of *Capra* and *Ovis* (goats and sheep), he is in no way immune to the antics of wolves and snow leopards, in fact the presence of such predators excites him even more than the relatively mundane observations of the mountain goats and sheep. Those take him not only to the Himalayas, but also to the desert mountains of western Pakistan and southern India, to observe markhors, tahrs and bharals, to take a census as well as advise on suitable preserves, and thus taking on local governmental missions. But as noted, he gets into gear when he describes in great detail the copulation antics, thus he always tries to schedule his excursions to coincide with the time of rut, which is not always very convenient as it can occur in winter. The herds are hierarchical, males ranked along a gradient of dominance and power, the signs of which are made rather obvious, through mere bulk, size of horns, distinctiveness of color, as to make unnecessary expensive fights, and establish preference between antagonists through mere shows, which of course can be rather subtle and involved, enlisting fully the authors power of observation and description. Such displays of status serve not only to intimidate rivals but also to attract and entice possible receptive females. The analogies to human society are obvious and may make us pause and take stock and reflect upon how much of our own actions are due to hidden biological inheritance. Sometimes it comes to fights. Fights seldom kills, although may accidentally cause serious injury. The most spectacular being the head-on butt at full speed, natural evolution having developed intricate ways of protecting the brains¹. When it comes to the difference between sheep and goats, they are not only anatomical, but also behavioral, and the author is delighted when he can document that the behavior of the bharals are indeed intermediate between those of sheep and goats. The ram rarely unsheath his penis for the purpose of display, the goat does it regularly, and not only that, it is also liable to mouth it as well, and urinate over its own face to enhance its smell and attractiveness to the opposite sex. The bharals mouth their penises but do not spray their faces and fronts with urine. The author speculates whether the bharal is evolutionarily on the road towards goatness and whether the similarities with the antics of sheep are due to a common ancestor or to parallel evolution due to inhabiting similar habitats. The nimbleness and agility of a wild goat is cause for admiration. In fact in their uncanny ability to negotiate precipitous terrain they are second to none, and provides them with their main protection against predators. Thus herds of bharals and other goatlike animals never graze fields not close to precipices.

¹ How come not evolving less vulnerable brains, a question which would be natural to someone thinking of evolution as merely a philosophical principle, deaf and blind to biological reality. Clearly the brain, so similar not only among mammals but across many classifying divides, is far less amenable to fundamental change than something so particular and relatively simple as the frontal anatomy of a skull.

Sheep are not as adept and they thus seek out different habitats. This is science too in a sense, but not as dry as the number-crunching kind that to many, including the author, makes science such an inadequate way of catching the mystique of existence. Interesting and satisfying as his chosen vocation may be to him, it fails to capture him fully. What makes him seek out those distant parts of the world, to brave dangers and sickening food (rancid butter being a staple, and dirty cups cleaned by spit and even dirtier fingers tokens of hospitality) as well as ubiquitous discomforts such as leeches, cold and heat, hunger and thirst, aridity and wetness, obviously goes deeper than mere scientific curiosity, especially that of a science which is intellectually rather pedestrian². There is a need for solitude, and a need for movement in an unsullied and extreme environment. Schaller is no climber, although he is not insensitive to the charms of such activities, but prefers to hike and trek. Obviously as the presence of living things, attracts him as a biologist, more than the presence of mere rock and ice. It is not the rock and ice, of which there is plenty in the Himalayas that needs protection, it is the wild-life that gives to the scenes a soul. The scenery may be stunning and beautiful, but empty of life it somehow loses all its meaning. He is well aware that he is late on the scene, only a generation earlier, those areas would be teeming with wild-life. With horror the author learns of the amount of animals which had been shot in the 'good old days'. What threatens a population is not the culling by predators, those keep populations fit by killing the unfit, but the reduction of habitat. Some of the wild-life has had their extermination postponed as having served as hunting reserves, and one learns that until the early 60's part of present day northern Pakistan were the realms of independent maharajas, whose descendants still owe land although their holdings, including their stately buildings, are in disrepair. Although many species are officially protected, on the actual ground distant and official power does not hold the ground against local pragmatist, and the author often receives offers to shoot animals. The establishing of a national park is easy on paper, in fact the author is instrumental in selecting and having one (Khunjerab) assigned in the Karakoam area, including the mountain K2; but to make it actually work in the way of enlisting local co-operation. In vain the author tries to instill some environmental responsibility among officials, but when it comes to a crunch, their abstract commitments collapse. In a way, his concerns may be thought of as elitist, who cares about the preservation of rare animals, when there are so many more pressing needs, and when some of them are actually inimical to human life and economy, such as the dwindling tiger (as Schaller notes sarcastically, the number of tiger specialists outnumber tigers themselves). Of course in the long run, deforestation and concomitant soil erosion not only degrades the land but makes it economically barren as well, thus undercutting the basis for human survival itself.

The book is divided into a number of chapters each one devoted to a certain region, often covered by many visits, testifying to the hectic life he must have led during the

² One should not disparage much of the hidden skill that goes into observation. The author concludes in passing that a passing snow leopard did not make a kill, from the absence of scavenging birds in the sky. An aboriginal hunter possesses a huge amount of experience and know-how that has never been formally encoded, likewise a field-biologist must possess skills and insights that are never explicitly displayed in written reports and articles. In general anyone engaged in an engrossing activity develops skills and insights which however necessary never become an official part in the same.

70's. There are several visits to the northwestern Himalayas, close to Pamir, with Afghan tribes and Mongolian traces in the faces of the population. But also to western Pakistan, where there are tribal people against whom armed protections are necessary (hardly any surprise that forty years later there will be plenty of recruiting ground for anti-western terrorism). The two most exciting trips are those to distant parts of Nepal. It includes the hiring of sherpa porters and the inevitable haggling involved³. Sherpas are exploited by climbing expeditions, which force them to do things for which they are not trained, thus there is a disproportionate loss of sherpas to death. Hiking is of course different, but still not something they in general are congenial to. However, for any success of an expedition it is paramount that at least some rapport are made with the locals, who can among other things effectively deal with the fickleness of hired hands. Typically on a hike, you find the author relentlessly pressing forward, making his own explorations, leaving the rest of the party trotting behind some of them several miles behind. Most of Nepal is Hindu, but further north closer to Tibet it is replaced by Buddhism in fact some of the parts were once Tibetanian territory and after the Chinese annexation many from Tibet fled south. Thus Tibetan culture is allowed to flourish in a way that is denied it by Chinese authorities north of the border. This particularly attracts Peter Matthiessen, a self-proclaimed Buddhist on his quest joining forces to the outlying Shey where Schaller is to study the bharals. This expedition is taken in late fall, and thus involves negotiating snow covered passes in severe cold. Shey itself is almost deserted because of the season, but a few stragglers remain, allowing them not only lodging, but also an interview with the resident Lama. The old Medieval culture appeals to the author, in the same way as threatened wild life does, a fossilized remnant of the past, but as the author acknowledges, everything not only human life and culture is ephemeral, including the ground on which he rests, which once was sea bottom as testified by the fossils spread around. Schaller stays a month, while his companion, with whom he does not have too much interaction, both of them preferring to hike by themselves alone with their thoughts rather than to engage in mindless chatter, limiting their intercourse to casual interchanges; decides to return prematurely to Khatmandu and civilization, no doubt, as the author remarks, restless to return to his children after the death of his wife. Not without some serious mishaps while on wintry December slopes as well as when transversing icy boulders, involving a fall into icy water, Schaller eventually hurries to Jumla to pick a flight back to Khatmandu. Living to tell he tale one surmises he made it.

Schaller writes a pleasing prose, not flat, not overburdened by purple phrases, so tempting a trap while writing about nature scenes. Occasionally there is a reference to a poem or two, or when stranded in a sleeping bag failed attempts to write haikus (it is a matter of striking the right tone, which does not come easily to a westerner). As prose samples one may point to *Livestock trails crisscross the hillsides, and minced to a fine powder by many sharp hooves, the soil follows the wind*, particularly the final clause is a nice touch. Or likewise at the end *..each animal reclines to chew cud, its eyes mere slit of satisfaction*, and we are reminded of human fragility *..their wingbeats strong where men gasp and die* as to Geese flying at 30'000 feet passing over Mt.Everest. Birds can tolerate

³ This is hardly surprising, a trivial service such as transportation by an auto rickshaw in any Indian city involves haggling

much higher altitudes than can man or mammals in general due to their ability to deal with low concentrations of oxygen, actually one of the few scientific nuggets of facts one as a reader is treated to,

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