

Jatinga: The Ornithologists' Paradise

Abstract

The village Jatinga is situated on the Borail Hills close to its highest peak (Hempantat) which is 6,000 ft. above the sea level and is surrounded by different ranges of the Borail Hills from all sides except a small gap in one side, i.e., towards south- west from the village end. The mysterious behavior of the birds flying over Jatinga from September to November has made this beautiful tiny place famous all over the world. The phenomenon which has attracted Ornithologists world over is suspected suicide committed by birds. The first mention of this mystery is found in the Wild Life of India (1957) by the British tea planters and Ornithologist E.P.Gee. The Zoological Survey of India visited Jatinga during the monsoon months of 1977 and got wide publicity from leading ornithologists in Europe, U.S.A and Japan. The unusual behavior of the birds seems to occur due to the peculiar weather conditions at Jatinga. Studies also reveal that the flight of water birds to Jatinga may be attributed to heavy rains and floods and submergence of their natural habitat in the surrounding areas.

Keywords: Jatinga, Dima Hasao, Assam, Borail Range, Mystery, Phenomenon, Birds, Monsoon.

Introduction

Just 9 Kilometers from Haflong, the district headquarter of Dima Hasao district of Assam, in the east there stands a tiny picturesque village called Jatinga on a spur of the Haflong ridge which itself is an offshoot of the main ridge of the Borail range. It is centrally located at the tri-junction of the roads leading to Haflong, Lumding and Silchar. The junction looks like a natural saddle with the Jatinga river flowing westwards and the Dolong river towards the north. The hill slopes with their grooves and gurgling streams and patches of evergreen trees provide a natural habitat for the birds. It is an ornithologists' paradise. There is poetry in the word Jatinga which means the 'pathway of rain and water' in the Zeme Naga terminology. Jatinga was first inhabited by the Zeme Nagas in 1890. They were the first to witness the mystery when their camp fires attracted the birds. This frightened them as they believed that the birds were evil spirits swooping down from sky. Eventually, they deserted the settlement. The Jaintias, who moved in the year 1905 under their leader Lakhanbang Suchiang, stumbled upon the mystery while venturing into the valley at night with lighted torches to round up stray cattle. The bamboo torches attracted showers of birds which the Jaintias regarded it as 'Gift of God.'

The village Jatinga is situated on the Borail Hills close to its highest peak (Hempantat) which is 6,000 ft above the sea level and is surrounded by different ranges of the Borail Hills from all sides except a small gap in one side, i.e, towards south- west from the village end. The gap is a gorge extending to the other end of the village. Thus, the entire village is like a capacity chamber where the village with high walls of Borail range serves as a volume chamber and the gorge towards south-west resembles a long pipe. During the monsoon and post-monsoon days, heavy rain clouds and fog enter the village through the gorge and cannot go out due to the presence of the Borail range encircling the village.

The mysterious behavior of the birds flying over Jatinga from September to November has made this beautiful tiny place famous all over the world. Here the mist and fog lie like a veil around the beautiful face of the damsel from September to November. Occasionally, the fog lifts revealing a garden village where nature has been bountiful. When there is moonless dark night and the breeze blows from the South to North, the sky remains moderately foggy and it starts raining slightly. At that moment, the birds over flying Jatinga use to come down towards powerful lights lit on the ground. A watch tower maintained by Forest Department provides an opportunity to see this bird mystery. In this context, once a renowned person did compose the following stanza.

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As fog comes at moonless night...
 When the wind blows in direction right...
 Jatinga turns into an island of search light,
 And birds appear like ghosts from nowhere.
 Jatinga village in the foot hills of Borail

Range is a halting place for many birds. The phenomenon which has attracted Ornithologists world over is suspected suicide committed by birds. The phenomenon occurs in the late monsoon months of August to October with September attracting the maximum number of birds. Birds are trapped by "Bird Lighting." They are attracted by artificial light on dark moonless night. The phenomenon occurs only when certain climatic conditions are fulfilled i.e., apart from moonless night; the direction of the wind should be South-West to North-East. Also, along the valley of Borail, there must be thick fog or mist and light drizzling. The southern wind carrying mist, when passes over this place, birds make their appearance in locations which are illuminated. The birds sighted during the phenomenon at Jatinga are Indian Ruddy, King Fisher, Indian Pitta, Green Pigeon, Black Drongo, Grey Heron, Spotted Dove, Quail, Red Headed Trogon, Great Barbet, Long tailed Broadbill, Blue Whistling Thrush, Slaty backed and spotted Fork tails, Blue Breasted Quail, White Breasted Water hen, Slaty Legged Crake, Common and Purple Moorhens, White Throated Kingfisher, Blue Rock Thrush, Nepal Fulvetta, Golden Spectacled Warbler, Red Breasted Parakeet, Vernal Hanging Parrot, Brown Hornbill, Grey Peacock, Red Jungle Fowl, Maroon Oriole, Black Throated Sin bird, Emerald Dove, Ashy, Pygmy and Spotted Wren Babblers, Black Breasted Bulbul, Fire Breasted Flowerpecker, Mountain Imperial Pigeon, Bay Woodpecker, Streak Breasted Scimitar Babbler, Silver Eared Mesia, Blue Winged Minla, Whiskered and White Bellied Yuhinas, Grey Sibia, Slaty Breasted Rail, Eurasian Curlew, Eurasian Woodcock, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Black Napped Monarch, Yellow Legged and Barred Buttonquails, Crested Serpent Eagles and many more.

Curiously, most of the doomed birds do not attempt to fly away after they land near the lights. They look dazed and disheveled, perhaps due to the trauma of the whole shocking experience. Such birds fall easy prey to the villagers. Some of the birds hovering around the light sources are brought down by a vigorous swing of the bamboo poles. Catapults are also used to bring down the birds in flight as well as those perching on the trees and bushes near the light sources. However, contrary to the popular belief, birds do not commit suicide. Under circumstances not yet fully explained these birds get caught in the fog and wind, get disoriented and seek solace of the light sources put out by the villagers. They fly against trees or other objects and get injured in their flight towards the light source. The villagers hit the hovering birds with bamboo poles or catapults to bring them down.

Various studies have been conducted to unravel the causes behind this phenomenon. The record maintained show that 44 species of birds have been attracted to the light sources. It has been established that the birds are not attracted to the entire Jatinga Ridge, but only to a well-defined strip,

1.5 km long and 200 meters wide. Invariably, the birds come in only from the north and attempt at placing the lights on the southern side of the ridge but, the birds fail. Another interesting fact has been brought out is that no long distance migratory birds get attracted to the light traps. The victims are resident birds of the adjacent valleys and hill slopes.

The unusual behavior of the birds seems to occur due to the peculiar weather conditions at Jatinga. There also appears to be a correlation between the breeding period of the birds and the Jatinga phenomenon. Studies also reveal that the flight of water birds to Jatinga may be attributed to heavy rains and floods and submergence of their natural habitat in the surrounding areas. It has been observed that there was a high congregation of birds at Jatinga during 1988 which happened to be a year of high floods. This extraordinary behavior of birds raises the following questions in our mind:

1. How can drizzles enhance the influx of birds?
2. What may be the role of fog and directional wind?
3. Why do the birds lose reflexes after dropping to the ground?
4. Why does the phenomenon take place only during the months of September and October every year?
5. How can new moon period affect the behavior of birds?

This strange phenomenon is attributed to the electro-magnetic characteristics of the Jatinga ridge. The ridge is bounded nearly on all sides by fault planes. This combined with the mineral content of the valley with its high magnetic properties could be responsible for certain geo-physical changes in the atmosphere here. These are enhanced during the monsoon months of September and October when the ground water almost comes up to the ridge top of Jatinga. All these are believed to cause certain unusual changes in the gravitational pull around the region. It is possible that these affect the nervous system of the birds making them completely disoriented and confused when they happened to fly over the Jatinga ridge. The rain cloud or fog contains statical electricity which changes and discharges continuously giving rise to an atmospheric electrical field. This electrical field possibly affects the geomagnetic of Jatinga. Moreover, another peculiarity of Jatinga is the presence of three geological faults, very close to each other in the village and its vicinity.

The soil here is very loose and the rain water can easily percolate through the gaps of the faults deep into the earth. Birds have a magnetic lobe in their brain and thus can feel such perturbations in geomagnetic field. The high speed wind creates disturbance to the birds in their nests. During day time, birds can find their bearing through even dense fog. But, at nights being disturbed both by the wind and the changes in geomagnetic field, they come out of their nests and start to circle in the sky. Light from any sources like torces, electric light or fire gets deflected in different faces of water molecules present in fog or drizzles creating some sort of illusion for the birds flying above. They become confused and come down near the source of light. Once they come down,

they cannot move due to the paralyzing effect, which they have in their wings. In this condition, they refuse to take even their normal food and ultimately die. However, it still remains to be ascertained whether geomagnetic factor is the sole reason responsible for the changes in the muscles and physiology of birds when they get down to the ground. Thus, as a whole, it can be said that the ecological scenario of Jatinga, its meteorological and geomagnetic factors work together behind the mysterious behavior of birds here.

The first mention of this mystery is found in the Wild Life of India (1957) by the British tea planters and Ornithologist E.P.Gee. In this context, he wrote the book, 'The Whole Thing is Extraordinary'. He noted that the birds' death took place only at this spot. Even when lights were put up in nearby places, the phenomenon did not occur. He also noted that some conditions are necessary for the phenomenon to take place. The Zoological Survey of India visited Jatinga during the monsoon months of 1977 and got wide publicity from leading ornithologists in Europe, U.S.A and Japan. Renowned ornithologists Dr. Salim Ali, Dr. Sudhin Sengupta, A. Rauf have carried out researches on this subject. However, no single hypothesis comprehensively explains the Jatinga mystery. The renowned ornithologist, Dr. Salim Ali notes that "The most puzzling thing to me about this phenomenon is that so many species of resident birds should be on the move when, by definition, they should be fast asleep. The problem deserves a deeper scientific study from various angles."

Conclusion

The people of Jatinga in particular and the district Dima Hasao as a whole should come forward for afforestation in this area to keep intact the prevailing phenomenon and also stringent rules and penalties should be enforced to check the bird killing practices. Obviously, it will provide scopes for further researches in this field, since many of the puzzles

regarding the mysterious behavior of birds still remain to be unraveled. Moreover, Jatinga with the rare beauty of Borail range can draw the tourists from all over the country and abroad as well during the period of birds' mysterious event. This will definitely lead to the overall development of the place. But, if steps are not taken right at this moment, the 'Jatinga-Bird-Event' will soon be turned into a historic event only.

Jatinga is well known for its horticulture produces and it is rated as the most prosperous, literate and ideal village in the entire region. The villagers are perhaps the best horticulturists in the state and they grow oranges, pineapples, papayas, jack fruits, betel leaves etc. abundantly. Jatinga oranges are famous for their tastes and sizes. Perhaps, owing to these reasons the district Dima Hasao is known as the 'Switzerland' of the state Assam

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Dear author, please provide aim of the study for this paper.