

FOREWORD

Time flies in the modern age—and a year has quickly gone by since the unexpected passing of Navjot. Walking along the corridors of the department, I still sometimes expect to bump into him—when he will force me to hear out his latest novel hypothesis, or listen to a new cheeky idea he just thought up. Sometimes I would shake my head and sigh because the idea is either too outrageous or he was just being mischievous. Sometimes I would look at him in the eye and say “are you mad?”, sigh, and later mumble “why not”. In the decade plus I have known Navjot, our interactions and discussions have always been exciting—never boring. He always has this child-like sparkle in his eyes and passion in his words that makes him hard to ignore.

The department hired him to be an ornithologist, and the selection committee (whom I was part of) was a bit concerned because his expertise was on boreal bird ecology and we needed a person who would work on the tropical fauna. Navjot adapted very quickly to tropical ornithology—as he adapted to the hectic life in Singapore. And as much as he growled and grumbled at the inherent bureaucracy that bedevils all large organisations, he actually adapted very well to the very different teaching and administrative structure of the National University of Singapore. Through years of field work and all manner of collaborations, I have found him to be an excellent colleague, and more importantly, always a good friend. We do not always agree—I am a conservative—he is a rebel-at-heart—but I believe we shared the same cause... And that has ensured the outcomes we championed have had always been successful. His bravado and the courage to try new things is a strength. When he moved into conservation biology in a big way in the early 2000s, I grumbled to him that he was moving out of his original domain—but he was adamant that was the way to go as there was much more to do than just “bird-chasing”. He was not wrong—he dived into it with his usual devil-may-care attitude, and within a few years, became a master of his craft. Classical Navjot.

Much has been written about his science (and he was very good at whatever he set his mind on), his writing prowess and productivity (he loved to write and synthesize), and his energy (he was always starting this and that with little sense of time or weekends). His end came too early—he was at the pinnacle of his craft when he passed on—and it is impossible to predict what he could and would have done when (or if) he mellowed with age... I would have expected him to mellow. And I would have also expected even more outstanding discoveries from him.

To my old friend and fellow warrior in conservation, an ode by Rudyard Kipling, from a time much less complex and far less crazy –

I have eaten your bread and salt
I have drunk your water and wine,
The deaths ye died, I've watched beside
And the lives ye led were mine

Was there ought that I did not share
In vigil or toil or ease –
One joy or woe that I did not know,
Dear hearts across the seas?

I've written the tale of our life
For a sheltered people's mirth;
In jesting guise – but you are wise,
And ye know what the jest is worth

Goodbye Navjot

Peter K. L. Ng