Salim Ali at 130 – the 'Birdman of India' and the Coimbatore centre that bears his name

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Why in news: 12 November 2026 marks the 130th birth anniversary of Dr Salim Ali (1896–1987), the ornithologist who made the study and protection of India's birds a science; his birthday is marked by bird-lovers as National Bird Day.

Key points

- Life: Salim Moizuddin Abdul Ali was born in Bombay on 12 November 1896 and died there on 20 June 1987. After some years in Burma (from 1919), he trained in Germany under the ornithologist Erwin Stresemann and came back to build field ornithology in India – he is remembered as the 'Birdman of India'.
- Surveys and books: working with the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS, founded 1883), he carried out systematic bird surveys of Hyderabad and other princely states. 'The Book of Indian Birds' (1941) became the standard field guide; with S. Dillon Ripley he wrote the 10-volume 'Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan' (1964–1974); his autobiography is 'The Fall of a Sparrow' (1985).
- Conservation: his work helped protect the Bharatpur bird sanctuary – now Keoladeo National Park, a Ramsar site (1981) and UNESCO World Heritage Site (1985) – and his voice helped save Kerala's Silent Valley from a hydro-electric project; Silent Valley became a national park in 1984.
- Honours: Padma Bhushan (1958) and Padma Vibhushan (1976); he was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1985. The Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary at Thattekad (Kerala) and the Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary on Chorao island (Goa) carry his name.
- Tamil Nadu link: the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON) was set up in 1990 under the then Ministry of Environment and Forests, with BNHS entrusted to establish it, and has its campus at Anaikatti near Coimbatore; it is now listed as the South India centre of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII–SACON). Around his birthday, citizen birdwatchers hold the annual Salim Ali Bird Count.

In the exam: TNPSC – SACON (Anaikatti, Coimbatore, 1990), the birth date 12 November, his books and honours; UPSC Prelims – Keoladeo (Ramsar 1981, World Heritage 1985), Silent Valley National Park, BNHS and the sanctuaries named after him.

Questions

1. The Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON) has its campus at

A. Bharatpur, Rajasthan

B. Thattekad, Kerala

C. Anaikatti, near Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

D. Mumbai, Maharashtra

2. Consider the following statements about Salim Ali:

1. He co-authored the 10-volume 'Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan' with S. Dillon Ripley.

2. His autobiography is titled 'The Fall of a Sparrow'.

3. He was awarded the Bharat Ratna.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 2 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

Answers with explanations

1. **C) Anaikatti, near Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu** – SACON was set up in 1990 under the then Ministry of Environment and Forests, with the Bombay Natural History Society entrusted to establish it; its campus is at Anaikatti in the Western Ghats foothills near Coimbatore. Bharatpur is Keoladeo National Park, Thattekad has the Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary, and Mumbai is the home of BNHS.

2. **B) 1 and 2 only** – Statement 3 is wrong: Salim Ali received the Padma Bhushan (1958) and the Padma Vibhushan (1976), not the Bharat Ratna. The Handbook (1964–1974) was written with S. Dillon Ripley, and 'The Fall of a Sparrow' appeared in 1985.

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