IN THE
SHADOW
OF THE
VULTURE
AN EXTINCTION OF MEMORY
48°c PUBLIC.ART.ECOLOGY, NEW DELHI, 12th-21th Dec, 2008 [www.48c.org]
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48°c

public art ecology

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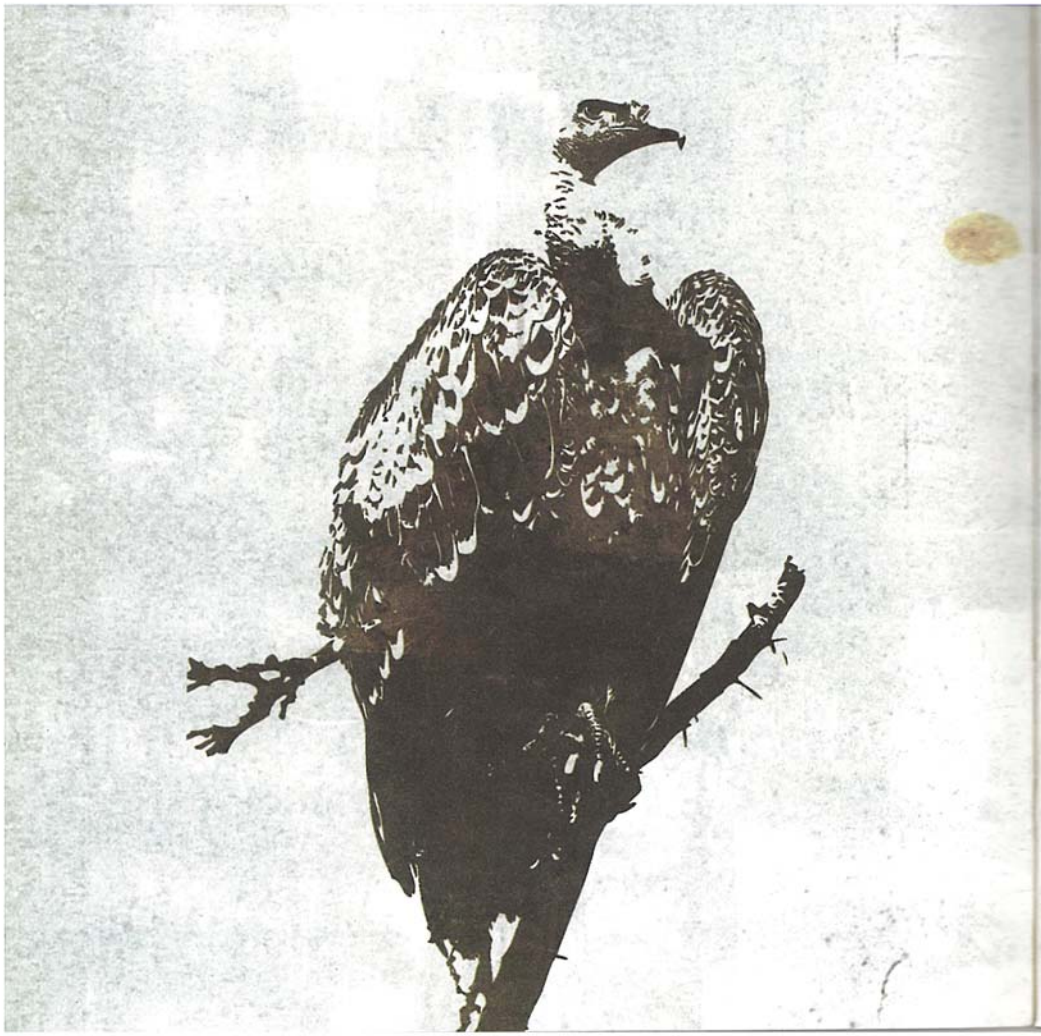
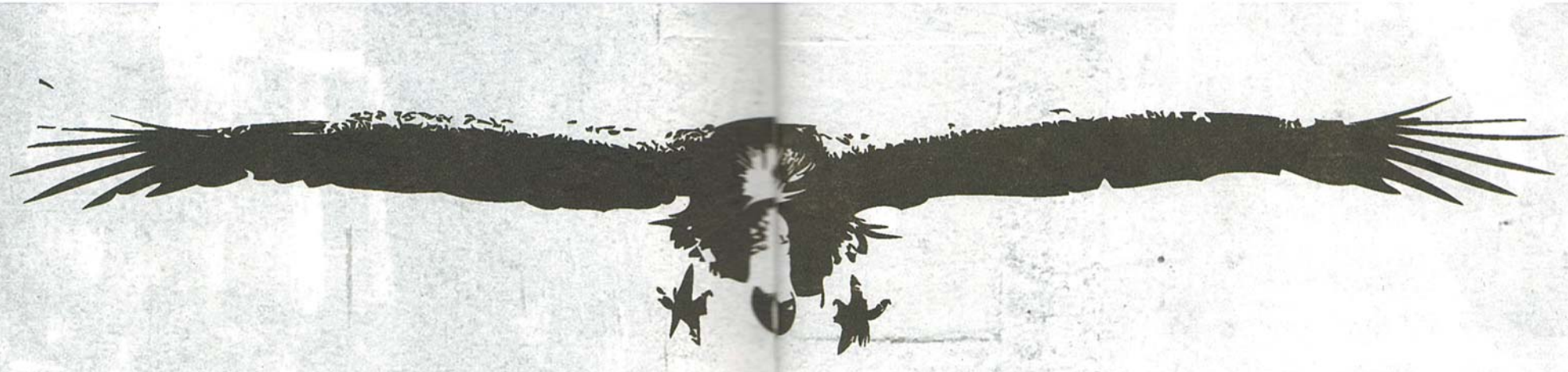


FOREWORD

It is surprising when one takes stock of what was even two decades ago. Change creeps onto one – un-dramatically. But only just a little while ago, the vultures were there, majestically nesting on the tree tops in the Delhi Ridge Forest, on its highest branches, and with only the sky above them. Or they were there as specks in the sky, souring higher than any bird could, barely visible. So many, that one did not even bother to look at them. Then a few appeared to be sick, their necks drooping, listless. Now they are already almost gone. As we were to discover later, all this happened owing to a drug, a pill, an unintended chemical. All of a sudden, my notes, and photographs, sketches and sightings, all took on a different meaning – of a remembrance. Even now, one expects to look up and find them again – just like that.

Last year, I did discover two vultures again. At the National Museum of Natural History in Delhi. They were stuffed. Probably the only two vultures left in hundreds of miles around the city, now fixed in a diorama. When we were discussing ideas about 48 deg C, this is what struck me, as what I wanted to do – to remind the city of what it had lost, and had not even stopped for a moment to wonder why.



From my years of working on toxics and health issues, as part of Toxics Link, it was clear to me what was happening. It was not the only place or time, when we had introduced such chemicals into our systems, without a clue as to their wider impacts on life around us. In fact this was the 'rule,' not the 'exception.' Our systems of chemical and drugs, even our system of environmental standards, just do not take into account any other life form except humans, and that also barely. We hardly know, even now, what we are exposed to, or what we expose others to. Such is the pace and infusion of the mass production systems we have created, that all sense of human scale is dwarfed.

To me, the challenge of the Art Project was at least two fold. Firstly, to remind the city of vultures was like reminding it of 'garbage.' The vulture was dirt – why should it be missed? One had to try and recreate the vulture as the majestic bird it is, and also the unthreatening and irreplaceable role it plays, tenderly and with docility in nature. Besides did it not have a right to life itself?

Having the city participate in the memory of the vulture was the first challenge.

Secondly, was to do this in an public space. I immediately thought of the space outside the Museum, which was the roundabout at Mandi House. However the larger issue was the idea of 'public' space in Delhi. As one discovers very quickly ,all such space is invaded by the many institutions of the state.

Security. Suspicion. Disorder. Revolt. Dismember. Deface. Garbage. Distractions. These are the kind of terms in which the state seems to think of the 'public' and its use of 'public spaces.' All is attempted to prevent this use from happening. Rather than view an intervention like the art project as a means of creating a new city consciousness, or creating an aware and responsible citizen, or even as a way in which people participate in such spaces, it is the language of 'claim' which drives the thinking. The state has claimed these spaces on its own terms, and any other claim is invalid. Reclaiming this for the 'vulture' was my second challenge.

We will all now witness, how successfully these were overcome – or not!

Ravi Agarwal
November 2008

THE DOCILE DEAD KEEPER

It is true, we all seem to be going somewhere. Very fast, and quick. The question is where? All around us, there are extinctions, as things get blurred and we cannot see what we step on, all sacrificed for the sake of the journey. But where does the journey lead to – what would we have learnt during it, that will form our future. It may be said that the barrenness will be fertilized with new dreams, new hopes and new possibilities. Yet, is that true? Do we really believe in this idea, or is the speed of the present so exhilarating that we cannot make sense of the landscape any more, since it is so very fuzzy? Maybe we are scared to see that it may be barren, very, very barren.

For one species, which came upon this planet, probably over a 100 million years ago, there is no journey left. Almost. The vulture is increasingly no more. Wiped out, from the staggering tens of millions in number in the sub continent, even a couple of decades ago, to less than tens of thousands. Over 95% of them have died, in the largest mass extinctions ever known in the recorded history of mankind. All killed, amazingly by one innocuous pill!

Maybe, it is a sign of times. Maybe, the wise vultures have departed on their own. Decided to withdraw from the cycle of evolution. After aeons of changing, adapting, evolving, co-existing, it may have become just too much to cope with. The world is no longer possible to survive in, and hence there is no future in it. What the biggest earthquakes, volcanoes, meteorites could not do, has happened in the time when we, as the human race, claim as a time of 'civilization.'

A sign of animals and birds sensing a tsunami much before we can?

The vulture is carrion. It is seemingly dirty, large and scary. It feeds on dead flesh. Why on earth should we bother for it? What we fail to recognize, in the age of abattoirs and incinerators, is that the vulture is also on top of the food chain, doing nature's job of ensuring that all dead are disposed of safely. It is also an unusually caring bird, nesting and bringing up its young with great devotion and tenderness, besides the fact that it only feeds on dead animals, but normally does not hunt.

It is the docile dead keeper of the planet. Only doing its job, and helping nature complete its ongoing cycle.

THE PILL

Surprisingly, in the end, all it took was a simple pill. That pill proved more powerful than all the vagaries of nature such a species must have faced over millions of years. This pill was meant to reduce pain in ones muscles, especially in livestock, so that they can produce more milk, more often. Livestock as industry. A simple drug, which helps animals like cows and buffaloes, become better machines to produce more milk — not to feed their young but to feed the dairies, which feed us. For unknowingly the cows and the buffaloes became the bait, the poisoned bait, which took the vultures out. But coming back to the cows and buffaloes which meant no harm to

the vultures except they offered themselves as food once they were dead. No big armies here. Just a pill, diclofenac, like aspirin, which we fed to the vultures through the carcasses of the cows and other slaves, and silently destroyed the kidneys of the vultures. First their neck would droop, then they would salivate, and then finally fall from the tree — dead. Perfect. Like nerve gas. Chemical warfare.

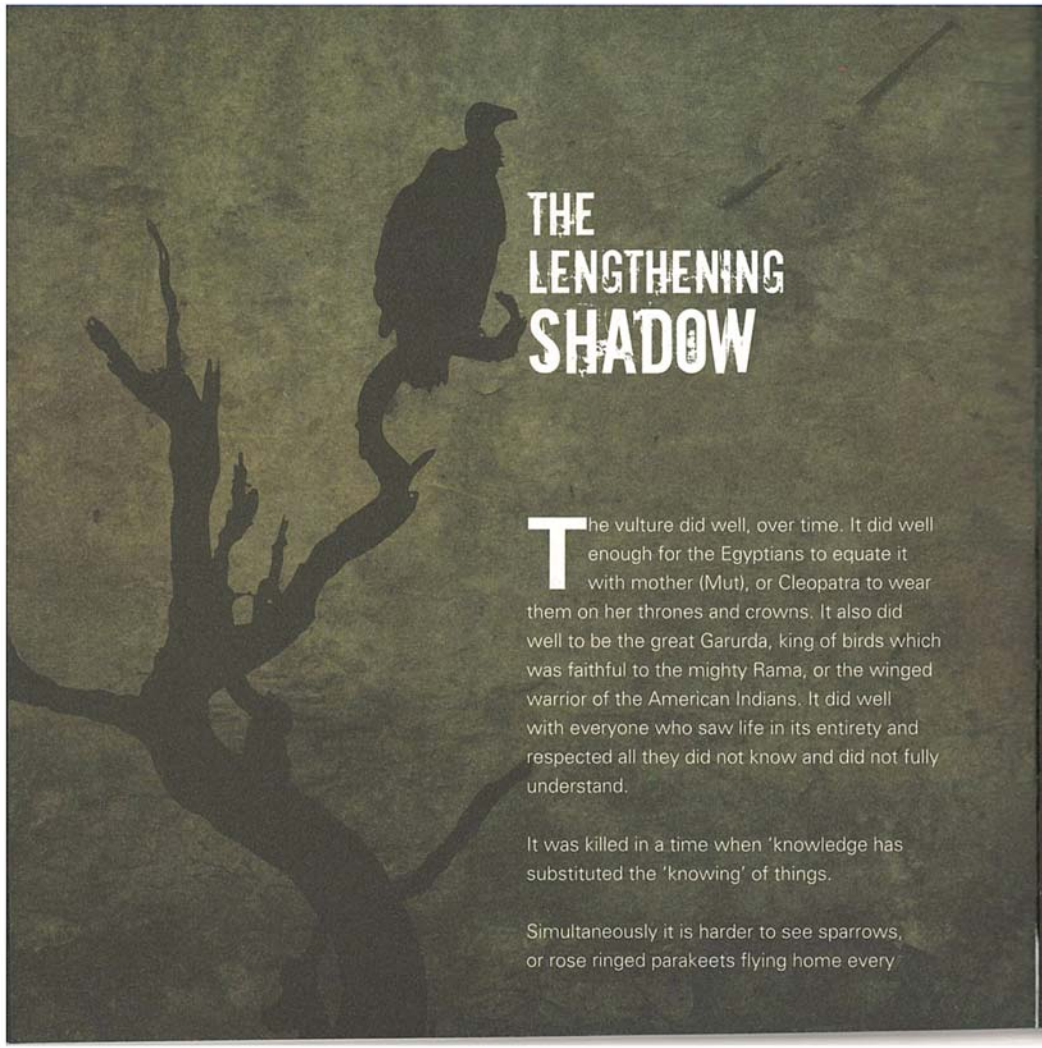
But no one is really asking why was such a pill necessary in the first place?

For over a century now human beings have been making and synthesizing chemicals for the benefit of human - kind. Over a hundred thousand such chemicals have been put out already. But no one knows what other harm they do to our lives and life forms which have inhabited this planet for millions of years. These are all considered safe till proven otherwise. While diclofenac did reduce body pain, it also made extinct a life form which had evolved over maybe a billion years — who knows from the beginning of time itself. Such is our intelligence and sensitivity and belief in our industrial systems. Such is the nature of the industrial systems we have created, and the methods of science we encounter.

It was in 1962 that Rachael Carson wrote the book 'Silent Spring." The observant scientist, reviewed thousands of papers, and predicted that chemicals like DDT are destroying the ecology of our planet. DDT and similar chemicals, she stated is causing the extinction of eagles, or leading to the genetic distortion of fish and other marine animals, which are continuously exposed to them, even in very minute quantities. Similar impacts have also been detected in human beings now. Through bringing home the increasing impacts of chemicals in our lives and the unintended and /or the unstudied impacts they have on our lives, she drew attention to the need of 'precaution.'

However the market based economic systems do not have any place for such approaches. If it is good for the market, it must be good. The chemical and pharmaceutical industry has fought regulation, information transparency and independent research for over a centaury. Their financial and political clout makes us believe that everything that is introduced on the market is benign. The onus of the burden of proof is on us. Hence the drugs are safe, unless proven otherwise. "Prove it!" is the motto. It is not by accident that it took over a decade to ban 'diclofenac." This ban is also only for 'veterinary' use, and not for human use. It is not uncommon to find the drug being diverted from human to veterinary use.

The story of the near extinction of the vulture is also the story of the fiscal and political power of our economic and industrial processes It is indeed a reduced life we inhabit, and the loss of the vulture is evidence of that.



THE LENGTHENING SHADOW

The vulture did well, over time. It did well enough for the Egyptians to equate it with mother (Mut), or Cleopatra to wear them on her thrones and crowns. It also did well to be the great Garurda, king of birds which was faithful to the mighty Rama, or the winged warrior of the American Indians. It did well with everyone who saw life in its entirety and respected all they did not know and did not fully understand.

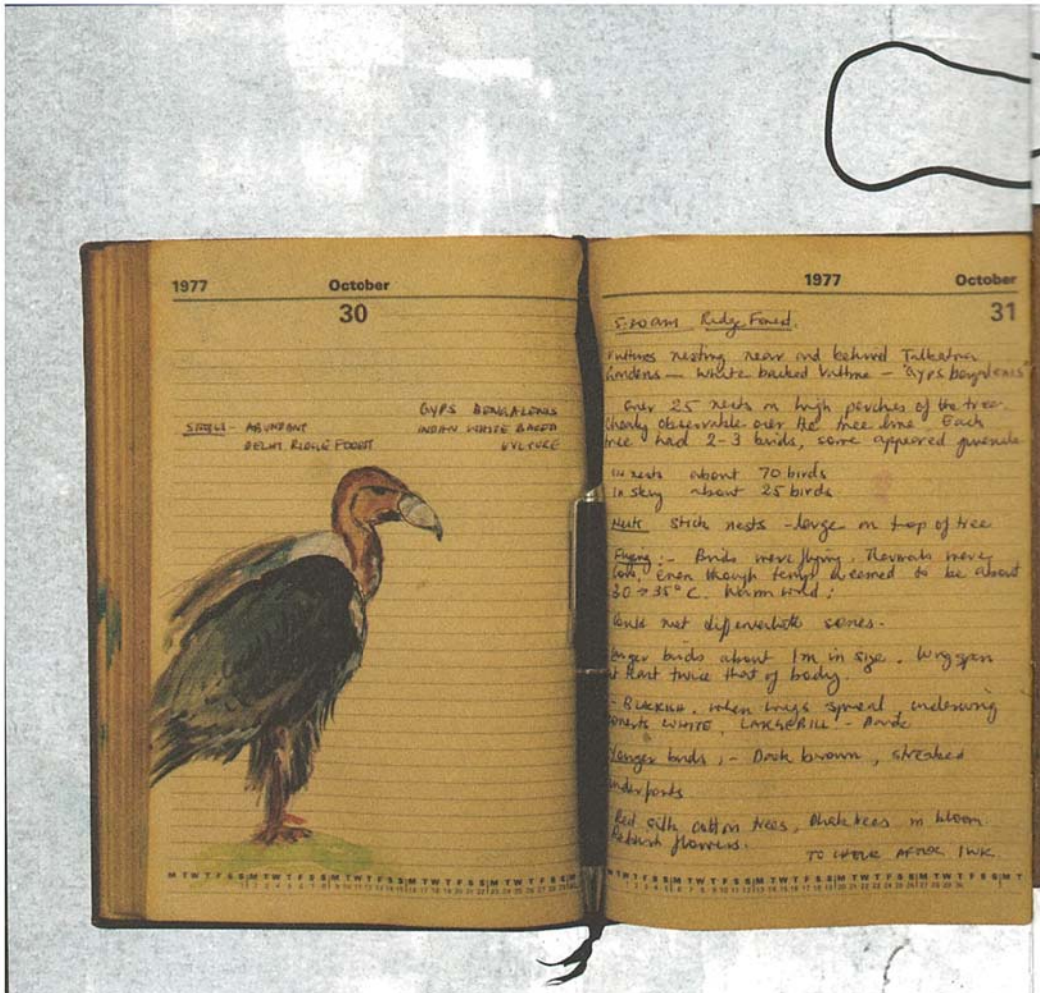
It was killed in a time when 'knowledge has substituted the 'knowing' of things.

Simultaneously it is harder to see sparrows, or rose ringed parakeets flying home every evening around our homes. Tales of tigers dying, elephants being killed, rhinos being poached, saras cranes disappearing are descending all around us. Maybe this is the age of man-made extinctions! Or maybe man has always led to extinctions – like the cheetah, the bison, the great American eagle, or now even the disappearing honey bees!

How does a species which has survived for millions of years, just die out in a matter of a years? In the past too, there have been mass catastrophic extinctions- the disappearance of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago, or the extinction of the dodo. The dinosaur died seemingly as a result of a massive meteor collision with Planet Earth, which blanked out the atmosphere with dust, blocked the sun, and essentially snuffed the pre-historic and massive creatures out. The dodo was hunted to extinction, unable to fly away from firearm bearing humans.

In the shadow of the vulture we live.
When wisdom passes, maybe the wise pass on too.

The Vulture is dead. Long may we live.



DIARY- FADING INK

My birding diary had notes on what vultures did, and how they behaved. Sometimes the notes were accompanied with sketches which were later colored. There were occasional photographs too, since it was difficult to handle binoculars, a bird book, a diary, a pencil and a camera – and still be still, and not scare the birds away.

One could see them nesting in plentiful in the Delhi Ridge Forest. These were the White Backed Vultures which I have been now trying to re-discover all over the country, for the past few months. I have barely succeeded. They nested in abundance, on the top of the tallest trees, and it is said that they used the same

trees each year, from October to March, their nesting time. Salim Ali describes them as "our commonest vulture." The Long Billed Vultures on the other hand nest on cliff faces and in rocks, while the Scavenger Vultures nest on the ground or on ledges, as far from prying eyes as is possible. Others, besides these found in India (not in Delhi) are – King Vulture, Cinereous Vulture, Indian Griffon Vulture, Himalyan Griffon Vulture, Himalyan Longbilled Vulture and the Lammergeir (Salim Ali).

Today the tree tops of the Delhi Ridge Forest are empty.

Finding the vultures to film them for this project has been a task in itself. Despite having put out a request to report any sightings through the widely networked e-groups on the internet, there were only a couple of responses, and

those too not specific to any location. Even conversations with expert bird watcher did not reveal any specific site, though there were some reports of general areas. It was only through the tourist-wildlife circles that I was directed to a location far away, beyond Bundi in Rajasthan. There I saw and filmed about 30 individual Long Billed Vultures nesting in a deep gorge. It was quite a sight to see vultures again after almost a decade and a half, and now they looked more gorgeous than ever before! A couple of weeks later I was guided to a colony of 8-10 white backed vultures, which are critically endangered, nesting on a clump of trees near a village, again outside of Bundi, Rajasthan. It was a magnificent sight, especially to watch a nesting pair.

LOVING

INDIAN VULTURES-
IN OUR SYSTEM

The **Accipitridae** is one of the two major families within the order Falconiformes (the diurnal birds of prey). Hawks, eagles, kites, harriers and Old World vultures are included in this group. The accipitrids have been variously divided into some 5-10 subfamilies.

The **Gyps** vultures are a genus of Old World vultures in the bird family Accipitridae. These are the typical vultures, with bald head, broad wings and mainly dark plumage. They are large scavenging birds, feeding mostly from carcasses of dead animals and find carcasses exclusively by sight. The characteristic featherless head is because a feathered head would become spattered with blood and other fluids, and thus be difficult to keep clean.

The **Indian White-rumped Vulture** is an Old World vulture. It breeds on crags or in trees

OLD
WORLD

CARING

NURTURE

in northern and central India, Pakistan and southeast Asia, laying one egg. Birds may form loose colonies. The population is mostly resident. The adult's whitish back, rump and underwing coverts contrast with the otherwise dark plumage. Juveniles are largely dark.This is the smallest of the Gyps vultures, but is still a very large bird. It weighs 3.5-7.5 kg (7.7-16.5 lbs), 75-85 cm (30-34 in) in length, and tapes180-212 cm (71-84 in) across the wings.

The **Indian Vulture** *(Gyps indicus)*, in the eastern part of its range, formerly considered a subspecies, have been shown to constitute a separate species, the Slender-billed Vulture Gyps tenuirostris. It is a scavenger, feeding mostly from carcasses of dead animals which it finds by soaring over savannah and around human habitation. They often move in flocks. It usually weighing between 5.5 and 6.3 kg (12-13.9 lbs) and measuring 80-100 cm (32-40 in) long and 205 to 229 cm (81-91 in) across the wings.

The **Slender-billed Vulture** *(Gyps tenuirostris)* is a recently recognized species of Old World vulture. For some time, it was lumped with its relative the Indian Vulture under the name of "Long-billed Vulture". However, these two species have parapatric or allopatric ranges and can be immediately told apart by trained observers, even at considerable distances. This species has suffered a marked decline in

DOCILE

its numbers in recent years. Wild populations remain from northern and eastern India through southern Nepal and Bangladesh, with a small population in Burma.

The **Himalayan Griffon Vulture**, *(Gyps himalayensis)*, average 106 cm (42 inches) in length, 272 cm (108 inches) across the wings and weigh 9.7 kg (21.4 lbs). They is the second largest Old World vulture and breeds on crags in mountains in the Himalayas and Tibet, laying a single egg. It has a white neck ruff and yellow bill. The whitish body and wing coverts contrast with the dark flight feathers. This vulture grunts and hisses at roosts or when feeding on carrion.

2008 IUCN RED LIST CATEGORY
CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

Decline and Dicloflonec

The Indian Vulture and the Indian White-rumped Vulture, G. bengalensis species have suffered a 99% - 97% population decrease in Pakistan & India and the cause of this has been identified as poisoning caused by the veterinary drug diclofenac. Diclofenac is a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug and when given to working animals it can reduce joint pain and so keep them working for longer. The drug is believed to be swallowed by vultures with the flesh of dead cattle which were given diclofenac in the last days of life. Diclofenac causes kidney failure in

WISE

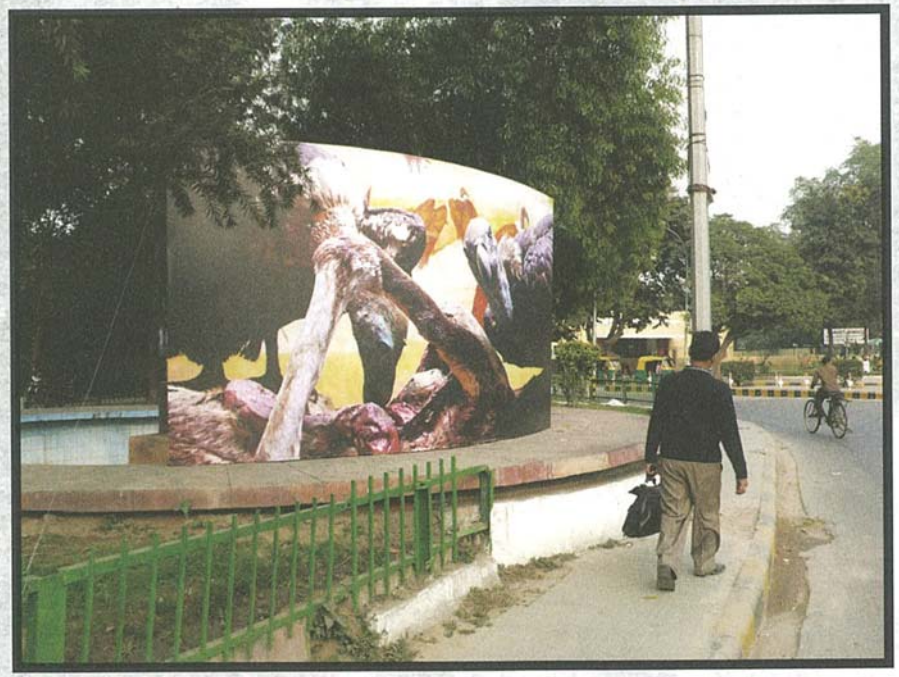
several species of Vultures. In March 2005 the Indian Government announced its support for a ban on the veterinary use of diclofenac.

Conservation measures underway It has been reported from many protected areas across its range. The Indian government has now passed a bill banning the manufacture of the veterinary drug diclofenac that has caused the rapid population decline across the Indian Subcontinent; their aim was to phase out its use by late 2005, although it was still in widespread use in 2007 and is likely to remain so for several years. Similar laws banning import and manufacture of diclofenac are now in place in Nepal and Pakistan. Efforts to replace diclofenac with a suitable alternative are ongoing; drug companies have now developed meloxicam, an alternative to diclofenac. Captive breeding efforts are ongoing at a breeding centre in Pinjore, Haryana. The centre is part of a captive breeding programme established by the RSPB and Bombay Natural History Society.

(Adapted from Wikipedia.com and http://www.birdlife.org)

KIND

PHOTOS: **Amit Khullar**



RAVI AGARWAL
Lives and works in New Delhi

Ravi Agarwal has pursued a photography practice integrally with his pursuit as an environmentalist. His earlier work, in the documentary oeuvre, encompasses 'nature', 'work,' 'labour,' and the 'street,' while more recent work has been traversing questions of the self based on explorations of 'personal ecologies.' He now works with photography, video and installation.

Solo Shows

2008 ***An Other Place***, Gallery Espace, New Delhi,
2006 ***Alien Waters***, India International Centre, New Delhi,
2000 ***Down and Out***, New Delhi ,India Habitat Centre,
Ahmedabad, Gujarat India,
The Hutheesingh Visual Arts Gallery,
Amsterdam - National Vakbondsmuseum
1995 ***A Street View***, All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi (Selected Curated, Group, Residency Exhibitions)

Group/Curated Shows

2008 ***Indian Highway***, curated Julia Peyton-Jones, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Gunnar Kvaran, Serpentine Gallery, London (forthcoming)
2008 ***Zeitgiest***, curted Latika Gupta, Palette Gallery, New Delhi
2008 ***Nature of the City***, curated Alexendra Keefe and Nitin Mukul, Religare Gallery, New Delhi (forthcoming)
2008 ***Still/Moving Image***, curated Deeksha Nath, Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi
2008 ***Click! Contemporary Photography in India***, curated Sunil Gupta and Radhika Singh, Vadhera Gallery, New Delhi
2008 ***City.Cite.Site***, Curated Latika Gupta, Anant Gallery, New Delhi
2007 ***Horn Pleas***e, The Narrative in Contemporary Indian Art,curated Bernhard Fibicher, Suman Gopinath, Kunstmuseum, Bern, Switzerland.
2007 ***Public Places***, Private Spaces, curated Gayatri Sinha, Zetta Emmons, Newark Museum, Newark and Minneapolis (2008) USA.
2007 ***Impossibility of being feminine***, Gallery Espace, New Delhi
2007 ***Have you seen the flowers on the river***, Khoj Residency, New Delhi
2006 ***Watching Me Watching India*** curated by Gayatri Sinha and Celina Lunsford, Frankfurt Fotographie International, Frankfurt, Germany
2006 ***Monsoon***, Alliance Fraincaise, curated Himanshu Verma, New Delhi
2005 ***Self x Social***, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jahawahar Lal Nehru University, New Delhi
2004 ***The Making of India***, Shamat, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi
2003 ***Crossing Generations: DiVERGE***: Forty years of Gallery Chemould, National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, curated by Geeta Kapoor and Chaitanya
2002 ***Documenta 11***, curated Okwui, Enzwor, Kassel, Germany
1996 ***2nd Biennial of Creative Photography***, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi

1995 ***First National Exhibition of Photography***, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi

1995 ***Shaman, Postcards for Gandhi***, New Delhi (Wadhera Art Gallery), Bombay, Bangalore, and Madras

1993 ***Bombay Natural History Society photo exhibition***, Bombay, India.

Photographic Books and Catalogues

Immersion. Emergence, Youthreach, New Delhi, 2007

Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism New Delhi; Oxford University Press and Amsterdam, University Press, 2000

Making a Difference, A collection of essays, ed. Rukmani Shekhar, Spic Mackay, New Delhi, 1998

Portfolios in ***The India Magazine***, 1995 and 1997
Portfolio in ***The First City Magazine***, 2003
Monthly Visual Column in ***First City Magazine***, since Feb 2005

Selected Publications

1. ***Hi Tech Heaps, Forsaken Lives*** (co-authored), Challenging the Chip, Labour Rights and Environmental Justice in the Global Electronics Industry, ed Ted Smith et al, Temple University Press, USA, 2007
2. ***Standardised, packaged, ready for consumption***, Sarai Reader 05, Bare Acts, Sarai – CSDS, Delhi, 2005
3. ***Beyond environmental standards, from techno centric to people centric environmental governance***. Troubles Times, Sustainable Development and Governance in the Age of Extrems." SDPI, Islamabad, 2006
4. ***Resisting technology, regaining and a personal ecology***, Sarai Reader, 03, Shaping Technologies, 2003
5. ***Corporate Social responsibility***, a critical perspective from India, Cometische humanisering? Ed Tonja van den Ende et al, Humanistic University Press, Amsterdam, 2005

Other

Received ***Ashoka Fellowship***, social entrepreneurship, 1997
IFCS- WHO Special Recognition Award for Chemical Safety, 2008

Web resources

www.raviagarwal.com,
www.toxicslink.org
www.48c.org
www.khojworkshop.org
www.iisg.nl/exhibitions/downandout/
www.documenta12.de/data/english/index.html
www.haveyouseentheriver.blogspot.com
www.inturbulenttimes.blogspot.com