This tree must have potassium

A hundred years ago, most Indian butterflies did not have ‘common’ or English names. They had only scientific names. Because these scientific names are long and difficult to use, naturalists deliberately coined English names. For those butterflies that have close relatives in other parts of the world, it was relatively straightforward to invent names: the names of the relatives were borrowed and modified. For other butterflies, original names had to be created. And in creating these names, the lepidopterists exercised the greatest creativity and imagination. Today, most Indian butterflies have English names, and these are astonishing in their unusualness and variety: Red Helen, Striped Blue Crow, Golden Angle, Spangle, Glassy Tiger, Bhutan Glory, Red-base Jezebel, Peacock Royal, Silver Forget-Me-Not—these are all names of Indian butterflies.

Indian birds, on the other hand, have had established common names for much longer. In many instances, familiar birds have names in each Indian language, and some birds have even a number of names in one language itself. And these names sound rather dull: crow, sparrow, parrot, pigeon. These names lack the exotic sound of the names of butterflies. What is worse, some birdwatchers have decided that they would like to ‘improve’ upon bird names by making them very accurate and rational. There is a bird in some parts of India that was known for some three generations of birdwatchers as a Small Green Barbet. The would-be renamers say that this bird is not really a small barbet and must therefore have a change of name. Because the bird has white patches on its face, they would like to call it the ‘White-cheeked Barbet’. White-cheeked Barbet indeed! What cheek! Similarly, there are people who point out, smugly, that it would be more accurately descriptive to call the Blackwinged Kite the Blackshouldered Kite. Shoulder, my foot! And so the list goes on. Every bird would have a correct and dull, unimaginative name if some individuals would have their way.

Fortunately, living things other than butterflies too have artistic names. For instance, there are bright insects called jewel beetles, and in the sea there are creatures that make snapping sounds that are called pistol shrimps. Then there is a tree called the Flame of the Forest. This last name raises the image of a plant covered with bright, brilliantly coloured blossoms. Actually there is a lot of poetic license involved. It is true that the flowers of the Flame of the Forest are pinkish orange in colour. But they are not particularly bright. The blaze of the ‘flame’ is only a dull glow at best. And there are so many trees that have brighter flowers: the Gul Mohur has deep red ‘flames’, the Indian Laburnum ‘burns’ with an golden yellow fire and the Jacaranda conveys the intensity of a lilac and blue flame.

All this is reminiscent of a test used in the chemistry laboratory for cations, isn’t it. Does the colour of a flower have anything to do with the elements it contains? If yes, I would guess that Flame of the Forest has calcium (‘brick-red flame’) with a spot of potassium (‘lilac’).

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