

### 7. BAYA WEAVERBIRD NESTING ON HUMAN HABITATIONS

(With eight figures in two plates)

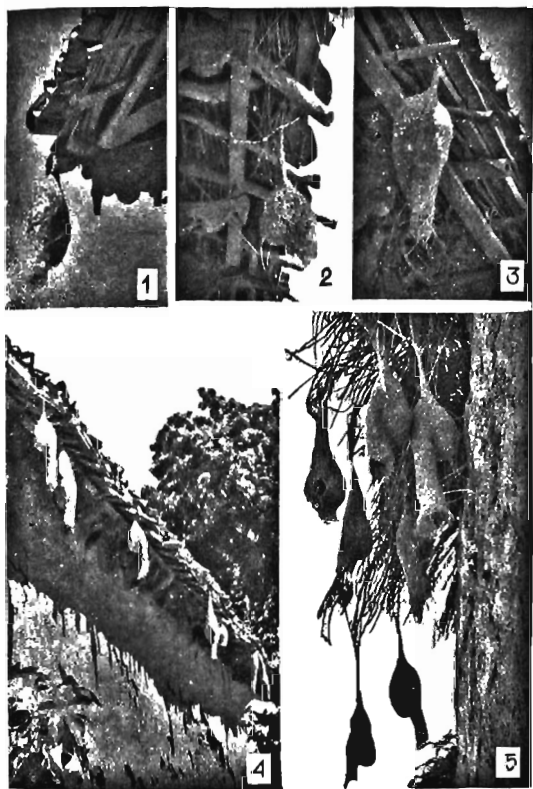
The Baya weaverbird (*Ploceus philippinus*) distributed throughout India, Burma, Ceylon, Malaysia and Thailand is famous for its intricately woven, retort-shaped, dangling nest. Equally important is the bird's capacity in selecting a variety of trees and other objects most suitable for siting its nests. In India, at least 30 different species of trees have been preferred as hosts besides telegraph and power lines, sides of wells, copium of compound walls and even eaves of houses.

Jerdon (1863)<sup>1</sup> wrote about the Bayas in India not using houses as nesting sites thus, 'In India I have never seen the Baya suspend its nests except on trees, but in some parts of Burma, and more particularly in Rangoon, the Bayas usually select the thatch of a bungalow to suspend their nests from, regardless of the inhabitants within. In the Cantonment of Rangoon, very many bungalows may be seen with twenty, thirty, or more of these long nests hanging from the end of the thatched roof, and, in one house in which I was an inmate, . . . a small colony commenced their labours towards the end of April, and, in August, when I revisited that station, there were above one hundred nests attached all round the house'. Smythies (1953)<sup>2</sup> also mentions that the eaves of village huts in Burma is one of the preferred places for *Ploceus philippinus* to hang their nests. Recent Indian literature on the Baya

<sup>1</sup> JERDON, T. C. (1863) :—The Birds of India 2, pt. I. The Military Orphan Press, Calcutta.

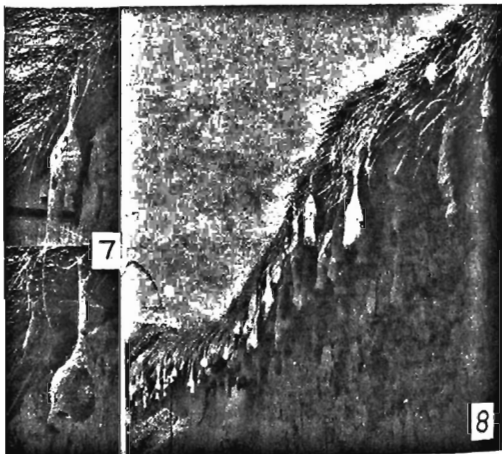
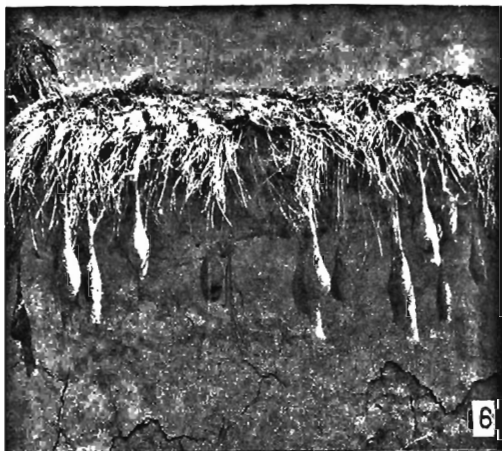
<sup>2</sup> SMYTHIES, B. E. (1953) :—The Birds of Burma. Oliver & Boyd, London.

## Davis : Baya nests



Figs. 1. A complete nest of Baya weaverbird hanging from the corner of a roof; 2. Another complete nest suspended from the grass-lining under a tiled roof; 3. A splinter separating from a bamboo split used as a reeper for a roof supports a large, complete nest of the Baya; 4. Seven nests hanging on the eaves of a house. Note the egg-chamber of all the nests facing the wall; 5. Seven of the approximately 30 nests attached to one side of the grass roof of a house near Lucknow.

Davis : Baya nests



Figs. 6. Closer view of a group of nests hanging on another side of the roof referred to in fig. 5; 7. These only two nests (complete) hang on the same roof (same level), 5 metres apart, of another house; 8. General view of a side of the house referred to in fig. 6 showing over 250 nests. Many of the nests were partially damaged at the time of observation.

do not mention the eaves of roofs in India as a site for attaching the nests of this familiar bird.

During an all-India survey conducted to study the Baya colonies in 1964-1966, I did come across a few cases where the bird had selected human dwellings to hang their nests. Some of these are reported here with illustrations.

A colleague at the Central Coconut Research Station, Kayangulam, Kerala State wrote to me that a Baya cock made an incomplete nest on the edge of his roof, thatched with coconut leaves. However, by the time I visited the place, the thatch was renewed. Near Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh) I saw four complete nests hanging on one side of a metre-high mud wall demarcating field boundaries. These nests were attached to the grass and brambles that formed a copium for the wall to protect it from the rains. I could not take a picture of these impressive nests.

While I was trekking in some suburbs in Uttar Pradesh, a village 30 km. west of Varanasi interested me most. On a tile-roofed house, there were two complete nests of Baya hanging from one of the reepers. One of them seen in Fig. 1 occupied the south-eastern corner of the roof, the other being located two metres away from it but attached to the same reeper (not visible in picture). Several children and grown-ups used to move about just under these nests from morning till night, but the birds did not seem to be disturbed.

Figures 2 and 3 show portions of the roof of another house in the same village. This house was also tiled in addition to having a lining of grass below the tiles. The nest in Fig. 2, a complete one, was founded on some fine twigs used for the lining. But the one in Fig. 3 was attached to a strip of bamboo partially separated from a half-split bamboo used as a reeper. The attachment of this nest in particular seemed very weak. But the nest being located on the safe side of the house, there was least disturbance from wind, and hence the single thin strip of bamboo was a sufficient support as is evident from the fact that the nest is a complete one. At the time of observation it was occupied by two grown-up fledglings.

In another house of the same village, I saw seven nests hanging on the reepers of its roof along a side safe from wind (Fig. 4). Very close to this house was a plot of sugarcane whose leaves supplied the nest-building material. It may be noted that the nests in Fig. 4 as well as the earlier ones were built in conformity with a particular alignment. That is, their egg-chamber faced the wall so that the entrance was away from it. This is the convenient alignment for the hen bird to reach directly the egg-chamber during her homeward flights.

Some of the nests in Fig. 4 were attached to the bamboo splits and the others on the fibrous cords used for tying the bamboos.

In a village 10 km. north of Lucknow, I saw a thatched house bearing along an edge of its roof over 250 Baya nests (Fig. 8). On another side of the same roof, about 30 nests were hanging, part of which are shown in Fig. 5. It was late November when I visited the locality and the Bayas had completely deserted the colony. Many of the nests were damaged by rats and birds. The adversities of weathering was also apparent on many nests. Practically all the nests were suspended on the grass and fine twigs with which the roof was built. There was no tile roofing for this house.

Fig. 6 is a closer view of a portion of the wall (and roof) shown in Fig. 8. Here the mud wall of the house and the grass thatch can be clearly seen. Out of the 15 nests visible here, only one is incomplete. This particular wall of the house-cum-store for agricultural commodities is about 15 metre long behind which is a two metre wide drain of running water. The drain as well as its margin away from the house were overgrown with many species of grass, some of them being wild sugarcane. The leaves of these plants provided the material for weaving the numerous nests. In addition, the house was surrounded by paddy fields on the two sides facing the sides having Baya nests.

Fig. 7 shows two complete nests from the eaves of another house located in a village one kilometre away from the previous one. The only two nests were hanging along the same direction of the roof about 3 metres apart. As this roof was located in close proximity with another only intercepted by a narrow lane, I could not get a convenient view for photographing the nests, and hence the two nests are shown separately. The roof of the house having the nests was very low and the lane was busy practically throughout the day. In spite of the crowd or because of it, the Baya preferred to select such a place for siting its nests. No one disturbed the birds in this village, even the dogs ignored them. Presuming these nests were long deserted, I pulled out the one shown in Fig. 7 (lower). But from within, seven fairly grown-up fledglings of *Munia* made their way out.

During the all-India survey, I came across as many as 1386 colonies of Baya, each colony possessing one to over 250 nests. But only the above limited cases of human dwellings which the Baya selected for building nests were observed.