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EDITORIAL

PAKSHIRAJAN LAKSHMINARASIMHAN: A PLANT TAXONOMIST WHO LOVED PLANTS AND PEOPLE ALIKE

Mandar N. Datar

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Pakshirajan Lakshminarasimhan: a plant taxonomist who loved plants and people alike

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Dr. Pakshirajan Lakshminarasimhan, a very prominent figure in Indian plant taxonomy passed away in Pune on 15 July 2020 due to COVID-19 infection. He retired merely a year back as the in-charge of the Western Regional Centre, Botanical Survey of India, Pune in August 2019. His farewell function attended by a large gathering of his colleagues, friends, and students speak volumes about how he nurtured relationship with his colleagues and mentored his students during the course of research activities.

Dr. Lakshminarasimhan was born in Pune on 28 August 1959. He opted for M.Sc. in Botany at Pune University and wanted to specialize in cytogenetics. However, he was offered plant taxonomy as a specialization, and on the advice of one of his professors, decided to go with it. After completion of his master's degree in 1982, he joined as Research Scholar in the western circle, Pune of Botanical Survey of India and worked there until 1987. BSI Pune at that point of time was renowned for producing eminent taxonomists and was preparing district Floras under the circle's jurisdiction. Young Lakshminarasimhan was offered to work on the 'Flora of Nashik District' and simultaneously registered for his Ph.D. under the guidance of Dr. Brahma Datta Sharma. Nashik District is a significant district of the northern region of Western Ghats. Lakshminarasimhan did extensive fieldwork in the district and, based on the work,



DR. P. LAKSHMINARASIMHAN
(28.8.1959 - 15.7.2020)

was awarded Ph.D. in October 1987 by the University of Pune. A new species, *Dicliptera nasikensis* Lakshmin. &

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B.D. Sharma, was published by him during this work, the first of the many. His thesis was further modified and updated for the book and was published by BSI in 1991 under the name 'Flora of Nasik District'. Simultaneously, he joined BSI on permanent positions as botanist first and later as scientist in 1989. When nobody preferred, he gracefully accepted his first posting as Scientist B in Andaman and Nicobar circle, Port Blair. It was a good opportunity. He studied with deep interest the flora of oceanic islands. At this new venue, he started work on the flora of Andaman & Nicobar Islands for 17 plant families and a project for documenting Flora of Interview Island, North Andamans. His stay at Port Blair yielded a large number of publications on the flora of Andaman & Nicobar. His first transfer brought him to Pune Circle in 1993 and he joined hands with stalwarts like Dr. S. Karthikeyan, Dr. B.D. Sharma, and Dr. N.P. Singh for bringing out the Flora of Maharashtra State. After Cooke's Flora, which was published a century ago, this was going to be a major compilation for this biodiversity-rich state. The first volume on Monocotyledons was published in 1996 while the dicot volumes appeared in 2000 and 2001. Simultaneously, he also worked on the Flora of Karnataka State, Monocotyledones and soon submitted the draft. In association with Dr. Tetali of Nowroji Godrej Centre of Plant Research and other like-minded scientists, he published a book on endemic plants of Maharashtra State. At the beginning of the new millennium, the Ministry of Environment and Forests launched an ambitious project of documenting plant diversity of national parks and sanctuaries of the country under the scheme 'Protected Area Network'. Lakshminarasimhan, by that time in a lead scientist's role, post-retirement of many senior personals from the Pune circle, coordinated this activity for the western Indian region. He started work on the flora of Anshi and Nagarhole in Karnataka, Molem in Goa, and Gugamal in Maharashtra. I was fortunate to get picked to work on this project and Lakshminarasimhan allotted me the work on Molem National Park. This opportunity to work with him and subsequent Ph.D. under his guidance changed my life completely.

In the mid of 2002, he got a golden chance to go to Royal Botanic Garden, Kew on deputation as the Indian Botanical Liaison Officer. He worked there between May 2002 and November 2004. Going beyond his official obligations, he not only helped numerous taxonomists from India with their literature and other requests but also further fine-tuned his own skills as a taxonomist. His association with Dr. K.N. Gandhi, a world-renowned nomenclature expert started from there. With new



Shrinath Kavade, P. Lakshminarasimhan, K.N. Gandhi, Rajendra Shinde and Mandar Datar (from left).

crafts learned, and new perspectives developed to look at taxonomy, he came back to India and joined the Central National Herbarium in 2004. He initiated works on the Flora of wildlife sanctuaries in Jharkhand, Flora of Lakshadweep, and the editing of Flora of West Bengal volumes III and IV immediately. In 2007 and 2008 his first three students were awarded Ph.D. from Pune University and the next batch of Ph.D. scholars promptly registered under him. The beginning of the new decade in 2010 came with new responsibilities for him as he was offered the in-charge position of Central National Herbarium, the largest and prime herbarium in India. The same year saw the establishment of ENVIS Centre on Floral Diversity of BSI, Howrah with support from MoEF, and Dr. Lakshminarasimhan was the undoubted choice for heading the responsibilities. The year 2010 was the best in his career not just due to these new responsibilities but also for felicitations coming from reputed national organizations like IAAT and APT. The appreciation of his efforts to shape Indian plant taxonomy came in the form of M.B. Raizada Gold Medal 2010 by the Association for Plant Taxonomy and V.V. Sivarajan Gold Medal 2010 by the Indian Association for Angiosperm Taxonomy.

Through ENVIS centre of MoEF, he published bibliographies and abstracts of states like Maharashtra, Kerala, Goa, Karnataka, West Bengal, Andaman & Nicobar in the coming years. Around the same time, three floras of the protected areas worked under the PAN project were published. Anshi National Park by Biosphere, Pune, and Nagarhole, and Molem by Botanical Survey of India. Following this, Flora of India Volume 23 was also published where he was co-editor. His obsession with endemic plants which started with a book on endemic plants of Maharashtra, lead to the publication



With Dr. Mao, current Director of Botanical Survey of India.

of 'Endemic vascular plants of India' in association with others. This is an important compilation for a biodiversity-rich country like India as this can pave way for many interesting ecological hypotheses on endemism. Flora of West Bengal came out in three volumes in 2015, 2016 and 2020 with Dr. Lakshminarasimhan as co-editor and co-author.

He was transferred to the Western Regional Centre, Pune (erstwhile Western Circle) in 2015, and worked there for four years before retiring as Scientist E in August 2019. During his stay in Pune circle as in-charge, he successfully organized many activities like Biodiversity Day Celebrations, Green Skill Development Programs, a workshop for mangroves and a few more. These endeavours immensely helped young students to hand-pick their paths in botanical careers. His association with Dr. K.N. Gandhi gave enormous opportunities to budding Indian taxonomists through organizations of botanical nomenclature courses. Lakshminarasimhan took a lead in systematizing these courses which took place in Kolkata, Pune, Coimbatore, and Shillong in 2013, 2017, 2019, and 2020, respectively. One can see the on-ground effect of these nomenclature courses organized by him in a subsequent increase in the nomenclature publications in India, especially from young researchers. Apart from these activities, he went on taking up new projects and continuing research on various aspects. In 2018, a species *Portulaca lakshminarasimhaniana* S.R.Yadav & Dalavi was named in honour of his contribution by Shivaji University group. Post retirement he continued working on Flora of India project for families like Gesneriaceae and Acanthaceae. It looked from his post-superannuation commitments towards the work, that the best out of Dr. Lakshminarasimhan was yet to come.

Dr. Lakshminarasimhan had a distinguished botanical career that spanned over more than 35 years. To sum



Presenting Flora of Molem National Park, Goa to Manohar Parrikar, the then Defence Minister of India.

up his achievements in a nutshell, he has published about 155 papers, authored and edited 25 books and contributed book chapters in 15 books, guided seven students for their Ph.D., published/named 39 taxa in association with others, and conducted several workshops and conferences. But his impact on taxonomy and taxonomic fraternity is beyond these numbers. This gentle soft speaking person was an inspiration to many through his discipline, dedication, and hard-working abilities. He helped immensely to almost everyone who went to him with queries or requests. He was an excellent resource person on nomenclature and methodology of writing Floras. Many of us would vividly recall several discussions with him about multiple aspects of taxonomy. He always had up to date information on various taxonomic and revisionary works carried out in India. He was on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Threatened Taxa*, *Rheedea*, *Nelumbo*, *Journal of Economic & Taxonomic Botany*, and *Phytotaxonomy*. A good reviewer contributes immensely in the overall growth of the subject, and Dr. Lakshminarasimhan by handling hundreds of papers as a reviewer in his career influenced the growth of the plant taxonomy in a significant way. He also served as a member of 'India Checklist Editorial Committee' of Missouri Botanic Garden, United States. Being a member of many project reviewing committees, he would encourage and guide people about project submissions. His sad, sudden, and unfortunate demise has created a big void in the area

of plant taxonomy research which is difficult to fill. We have lost not only a thoughtful plant taxonomist but an amazing person too. We are surely going to miss Dr. Lakshminarasimhan for years to come.

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PHD STUDENTS

Completed

1. M.N. Datar - An Assessment of Floristic Diversity of Molem National Park, Goa - Pune University.
2. S.A. Puneekar - An Assessment of Floristic Diversity of Anshi National Park, Karnataka - Pune University.
3. R. Manikandan - An Assessment of Rajiv Gandhi National Park, Karnataka - Pune University.
4. Debatri Panja (Kundu) - Studies on Taxonomy of the Tribes Acantheae, Nelsonieae and Thunbergieae (Acanthaceae) in India - Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan.
5. Shyam Biswa - Floristic Diversity of Koderma Wildlife Sanctuary, Jharkhand - Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan.
6. Bandana Bhattacharjee - Revision of the tribe Vernonieae Cass. (Asteraceae) - Kalyani University.
7. Vijay Kumar Masatkar - Floristic Diversity of Palkot Wildlife Sanctuary, Jharkhand - Barkatullah University, Bhopal.

Present

1. Sameer Patil - Flora of Pushpagiri Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka - Pune University.
2. Akramul Hoque - Taxonomic Revision of the family Dioscoreaceae in India - Calcutta University, West Bengal.
3. S. Shalini - A Taxonomic Revision of the Tribe Argyreieae Choisy ex G. Don (Convolvulaceae) in India - Calcutta University, West Bengal.

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