

Obituary

Wolfgang Theuerkauf (1948-2014)



Photograph: K. Harilal

During my last visit to Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary (GBS) in Alattil, Peria, North Wayanad on 12th October 2014, I noticed a vacuum in the courtyard, close to the library, which was originally the kitchen in the beginning. There was a Norfolk Island Pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*) growing in the courtyard with its towering presence having characteristic pine-like branches forming a beautiful shape, more like the leaning tower of Pisa. On enquiry I was informed that it was cut down a few days before as it was becoming unstable and could come down on the building or on the greenhouse below, in a storm. It was a majestic tree upon which there were many small epiphytes of ferns, mosses and lichens living together happily. Its disappearance was quite symbolic of what was in store for us in the following days.

When we finished our field work in the Western Ghats and came back home Ms Suprabha Seshan,

the able and evocative spokesperson who also combines her dual role as education and outreach officer of GBS informed me that our good friend left us.

Wolfgang Theuerkauf passed away on 6th Nov. 2014 at about 10.30 p.m. He was 66. He was buried the next day at 11 a.m. in the presence of his close friends, relatives, staff and neighbours in the campus of Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary which he built up with his life. Like a passing breeze everything went on without any pomposity and statement. There were no cries, no whispers, the sun shone above GBS as usual and the dark night fell like a black blanket. The last remains of my good friend were received by the good earth where he lived for the last 40 years in simplest style anybody can imagine of.

Wolfgang Theuerkauf was known to me for the past 33 years. All these years he was a trusted and affectionate friend, a dedicated researcher and a good human being. Many a time he asked me to procure literature for him that were then unavailable on the net; on Urticaceae, *Lasianthus*, *Impatiens*, etc. At the same time, whenever I needed some German literature, he brought me copies, sometimes the original itself, like a book by Meebold and cared to provide translations when needed. The efforts that he has put in at GBS in its growth and development as a major centre of plant conservation and education have been phenomenal. He was an untiring champion, had indefatigable energy throughout except the last couple of months who spearheaded conservation activities of his beloved endemic plants of Western Ghats in his small plot of pristine patch of green heaven at Alattil. Like many others the Norfolk Pine Tree was also planted by him in the courtyard thirty years ago.

When a small piece of land was given to Theuerkauf in the early seventies he was very raw in dealing with the situation, aggravated by lack of funds for various requirements. By the early eighties he started to visit several institutions like Kerala and Calicut Universities, especially the Botany Departments to include him in the exploration trips so that he could collect some

species and learn about them. His primary interest then was ferns and orchids came second. He met several professors, teachers and research scholars of these departments and became part of their field explorations to collect plants from different forest areas across the state. I met him in 1981 at Calicut University where I was a research scholar under Prof. K.S. Manilal working on the flora of Silent Valley. Later, he joined me many times in our Silent Valley expeditions crisscrossing the forests and collecting ferns and orchids which he later established nicely in GBS. I specifically remember an occasion when Suprabha drove him down to Wandoor, a quiet place in Malappuram District, Kerala where I showed him a supposedly extinct orchid *Vanda wightii* Rchb. f. growing luxuriantly on trees in the highway. As part of road widening all the trees were removed and along with disappeared their bountiful of orchids and whatever we salvaged then are now surviving at GBS and TBGRI. While at Calicut I made several reciprocal visits to GBS helping him in identification of orchids. As his living collections increased he was badly in need of literature on orchids as he was in need of more funds to maintain the collections. For literature side I introduced him to many giants in the fields of plant science in general and orchid science in particular like Gunnar Seidenfaden of Denmark, Leslie A. Garay of the US, Paul Ormerod of Australia, Jaap Vermeulen of the Netherlands, Prof. H.Y. Mohan Ram, Dr M. Sanjappa, Dr J. Joseph and many Indian botanists. In 1984 I moved to Trivandrum to take up an assignment in Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute (TBGRI), but our friendship grew from strength to strength thereafter.

As his literature collection increased he updated his knowledge on plants and plant related issues, shedding many of his earlier views. Initially, he was very much biased on South Indian plants mostly endemics. But as he grew older he became more accommodative and fine collections of several groups of plants like *Impatiens*, *Sonerila*, *Arisaema*, *Amorphophallus* and other aroids and even carnivorous plants could also be made. From our collections we freely exchanged plants for our mutual benefit. I specifically remember the case of *Nepenthes ventricosa* which I received as gift from Paris. I gave him a plant which he grew very nicely. My plant at TBGRI in the meantime died, but Theuerkauf gave me a replacement. He also gave me several carnivorous plants for my Children's Education Programme called *Plant Wonders* which attracted thousands of students

every year. As Theuerkauf could manage to get some funds from various sources he adopted some local people to teach his favourite groups of plants like orchids and ferns. Suma Keloth thus got orchids and Laly Joseph took up ferns for their studies. In a matter of ten years, they became experts in their chosen groups, in taxonomy, cultivation and conservation. Ms Purvi Jain who joined later takes care of the conservation actions especially the health and well being of the species grown at the natural surroundings in the garden like the tree trunks, rock crevices, open grasslands and every niche possible. Along with Suprabha, these women make a formidable team to carry forward the ideals of the departed soul.

Initially, GBS was open to only a selected few who were known to Theuerkauf. As collections grew up from that of Western Ghats to pan Indian, Asian and even global, Theuerkauf opened his doors to visitors. The influx of visitors caused problems to him as he had to find suitable guides always to take them around. This strained his purse but generous supports came from several sources including Indian friends. He offered food and accommodation to serious botanists who wanted to make use of his growing living collections and library. I gratefully acknowledge here myself as one of the beneficiaries of his good friendship who enjoyed every bit of it living together and discussing species boundaries, changing concepts, clarities brought out by recent DNA studies, etc. He was very kind and generous to me, freely giving me many new collections of orchids which he could not identify, many times keeping flowers in spirit for me to check later.

The hard labour that Theuerkauf has put in to develop GBS and the training given to his trusted lieutenants, I am sure, will certainly pay off and will help continue his legacy in the coming years. In the meantime, as botanists and conservationists we can also contribute our might to help GBS to stand on its own and work for the objectives for which our good friend spent his life.

Theuerkauf is survived by his wife Leelamma and children Sandilya and Anna, their spouses Sruti Yusufi and Abhishek Jain respectively and the grand daughter Sarayu as well as an extraordinary sanctuary of plants.

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