

Obituary

Prof. (Dr.) Rolla Seshagiri Rao (1921 - 2015)



Photograph: C. Suseendran

Prof. (Dr.) Rolla Seshagiri Rao, the grand patriarch of Indian botany, breathed his last in the wee hours (5:30 a.m.) of 23rd February 2015 at Delhi-Noida, where he was undergoing treatment at his son's residence. He passed away peacefully in his sleep. His mortal remains were brought back to his home in Whisper Valley, Hyderabad, the next day. His cremation took place on 26th morning; the last rites were attended by a huge gathering of mourning relatives, friends, colleagues and students.

Born on 19th August 1921, he was the oldest living 'active' botanist in the country. The word 'active' is very much appropriate for him as his interest in plant taxonomy remained till the last. He was a frequent attendee of the IAAT conferences and used to interact very actively with botanists, young and old alike, recounting his plant explorations. He started his career in 1942 as a Lecturer in P.R. College, Kakinada, where he taught till the year 1950. He joined the Botanical Survey of India (BSI) in

1950 and served its regional offices in Shillong and Pune. Prior to his retirement in 1977, he officiated as Director of the department. Subsequently, he joined Andhra University and served as Head of the Department of Botany (1977-81).

Indeed, he was a hardcore field botanist/plant taxonomist of the old school. During his entire tenure in the BSI he explored the floristically rich areas of the country, particularly the Eastern Himalaya, NE region, Western Ghats and the Eastern Ghats; his indefatigable energy and indomitable spirit helped him pursue his field studies relentlessly. Being an outdoor person at heart and adventurous in nature, trekking the mountains and exploring the forests came naturally to him. He led the scientific group of the first major Indian expedition to mount Cho Oyu, which is known to be the sixth highest mountain in the world. During 1958 he also participated in one of the first Indian mountaineering expeditions in the Himalayan region; he was also part of the other expeditions, including the plant collection expedition conducted by the British Museum.

He published about 100 research papers and twelve books, including the *Flora of Goa, Daman, Diu* (1985), *Flora of Srikakulam* (1986), *Flora of West Godavari District* (1986) and *Flora of East Godavari District* (1999) along with his colleagues and students; his papers mostly comprised floristic accounts, covering many areas of the Eastern Ghats, Himalayas and NE region. The new plant species discovered by him include: *Cyanotis arcotensis* R.S. Rao, *C. cerifolia* R. S. Rao & Kammathy, *Iphigenia magnifica* Ansari & R.S. Rao, *I. sahyadrica* Ansari & R.S. Rao, *Pimpinella katrajensis* R.S. Rao & Hemadri, *Pollia hasskarlii* R.S. Rao, *Rubus ghanakantae* R.S. Rao & J. Joseph, *Tricarpelema glanduliferum* (J. Joseph & R.S. Rao) R.S. Rao. During the period 1965-1972, while being stationed at BSI, Pune, he was associated with collaborative research projects on environmental pollution and human allergic diseases. Along with Drs. V.H. Kapadia, Sukh Dev and M.Y. Ansari, he discovered that the alkaloid Colchicine could be sourced, alternatively, from *Iphigenia stellata* for commercial purposes; this finding was patented in 1971. During his stint

at BSI, Pune, he also developed interest in the family Commelinaceae, on which he worked with his student Dr. R.V. Kammathy. He retained this interest till the end.

In recognition of his work he was awarded the prestigious 'Prof Panchanan Maheswari Medal' by the Indian Botanical Society in 1984 and 'Scientist of the Year' award by the National Environmental Science Academy in 1991. He was also conferred with the 'Prof Y.D. Tyagi Gold Medal' by the Indian Association of Angiosperm Taxonomy in 1996. Many novelties commemorate him: the genus *Seshagiria* Ansari & Hemadri (represented by the species, *S. sahyadrica*) and species *Ceropegia rollae* Hemadri (= *C. lawii* Hook. f.), *Pimpinella rollae* Billore & Hemadri, *Flemingia rollae* (Billore & Hemadri) An. Kumar, *Gaultheria seshagiriana* Subba Rao & Kumari, *Erythroides seshagiriana* A.N. Rao [= *E. hirsuta* (Griff.) Ormerod], *Habenaria seshagiriana* A.N. Rao (= *H. pantlingiana* Kraenzl.), *Ophiorrhiza seshagiriana* Sikdar & Maiti (= *O. heterostyla* Dunn), to name a few.

He was also known to be an excellent administrator and a tough task master; a disciplinarian to the core, he himself lead a rather Spartan and structured life, maintaining a strict time schedule for work/play hours and frugality in eating with strong preference for a healthy diet. Right from his early days he was a fitness freak, maintaining a strict regimen for physical exercises. He was particularly fond of outdoor sports; playing tennis and football was his passion. We, as students, would often see him sauntering into the taxonomy class dressed in white immaculate shorts and T-shirt and shoes, swinging his tennis racket nonchalantly. He was very selective about his dress; his attire - be it formal wear or sports kit - suited his tall and handsome personality.

He never actually 'retired' in the real sense of the word; he actively pursued his interests in dramatics, music and photography. He involved himself with many social/cultural activities. He lectured widely on issues related environment and biodiversity conservation. While serving as President of the Kisan Samkshema Sanghatana, a registered society in Andhra Pradesh, he facilitated development of a co-operative farming model in a 100 acres plot near Hyderabad, with mixed cultivation of selected hybrids of fruit yielding trees, teak plantations, medicinal plants, vegetables and horticultural plants (for cut-flower yield), using ground water through drip irrigation towards betterment and empowerment of village communities living in this semi-arid area. As

Advisor and part of the Technology Consortium of TCC, he helped organize a national seminar on 'Village Regeneration Systems' during 3-7 October 1995. He contributed to imparting knowledge on cultivation techniques of medicinal plants as Executive Member of Swami Ramananda Thirtha Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Research Committee during 1999-2003. He also served as elected member of the Governing Council of INTACH, New Delhi, during 2007-2010. His interest in the Botanical Survey of India, his 'parent department' as he called it, did not wane over the years; it was largely as a consequence of his initiative and persistent efforts, spreading over a decade, that the 'Deccan Circle' (now known as Deccan Regional Centre) of BSI was established, with the active support of Dr. M. Sanjappa, the then Director of BSI, and officials in the Ministry of Environment & Forests, at Hyderabad in 2006.

At a personal level, he was my teacher in the post graduate level at Andhra University; the relationship sustained beyond the university days and he took on the role of 'friend, philosopher and guide' throughout the rest of his life. His visits to my home in Delhi-Ghaziabad were cherished moments for the entire family. His interest in my conservation research work, including the garden development work at Noida, was very encouraging and kept me going during the tough times. Along with Professor C.R. Babu and Professor H.Y. Mohan Ram of Delhi University, he formed the triumvirate of senior academicians who took keen interest in the development of the National Botanic Garden (renamed as Botanic Garden of Indian Republic) set up by the Ministry of Environment and Forests at Noida in March 2002. Whenever he was in Delhi for some official meeting or personal work he would make it a point to visit the garden to see the new plant introductions and various thematic sections under development.

The sad demise of Prof. R.S. Rao has indeed left the botanical fraternity poorer. He is survived by his wife, Bhanumathi Devi, daughters, sons, grandchildren and great grandchildren. He was very much a family man -- a loving husband, a caring father and an affectionate grandpa. Having lived life to the full, he walked into the sunset in the same dignified manner in which he lived. His passing away has also left a void in the personal lives of those of us who knew him well. May his soul rest in peace.

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