

A leading horticulturist and conservationist

An obituary of Prof. A. Abraham (1914–1994)

In the death of Professor A. Abraham, India lost a leading horticulturist and conservationist as well as a renowned scientist, educationist and administrator. The inspiring story of the establishment of the Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute against heavy odds is actually the three-decade-long saga of Abraham. Conservation had not gained the present-day status or relevance in 1949 when Abraham formulated a plan to save the declining genetic wealth of Western Ghats by setting up a Research Garden. Predictably, his proposal evoked little response from the government. Undaunted, he launched a campaign to educate the bureaucrats and their masters which went on for thirty years before sanction was obtained for the establishment of the Garden in 1979.

Government's green signal, however, marked only the beginning of travails. Getting suitable land, training the requisite staff, raising basic collections and building up infrastructural facilities posed formidable problems. In the areas of planning, plant materials and staff training, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, gave generous and sustained professional help. With the co-operation of Kew and of other Gardens and experts, the Tropical Botanic Garden was soon set up successfully. Abraham was the Director of the Garden for the first four years and even after his formal retirement continued to guide the development of the Garden.

The Garden was his dream and he strived long for its realization, but Abraham had other interests too and left his imprints in the areas of higher education, administration and research. As Dean of Science and as Vice-Chairman,

Council of Research of the Kerala University, he played a crucial role in the organization of research and teaching departments, in restructuring syllabii and in developing a new University campus at Kariavattom near Trivandrum. Membership in the policy-making bodies such as the Syndicate of the Kerala University helped to hasten his drive for educational reforms and also aided his efforts to start two more Universities – Cochin and Calicut – in the Kerala State.



Administration claimed a major share of his time but it did not affect his contributions to basic and applied sciences. UR-19, the rice strain, and the high-yielding M-4 Cassava variety he introduced from Malaya were vital contributions to the agriculture sector. He was an internationally known cytogeneticist and in pteridophyte cytology the Trivan-

drum school he established gained leadership even as early as in the fifties. Many were the research students he trained and several of them made a mark in the research areas to which he had carefully and rigorously introduced them.

Along with his research contributions, Abraham is known for his mastery in building institutions; among them are the University Botany Department and the Central Tuber Crops Research Institute in Trivandrum. In 1972, he became the first Chairman of the Committee on Science and Technology of the Kerala State and helped nourish the several research institutions under its care. The four-year assignment at the FAO helped to strengthen and expand his international contacts. This remarkably rich and varied career stood in good stead in commissioning the cherished project of Tropical Botanic Garden against seemingly invincible obstacles.

Abraham was extremely generous and compassionate and, for the needed, was an ever-dependable source of sympathy, support and succour. His colleagues, students and friends will long remember his majestic bearing, his great strength of character and the courageous leadership he provided in times of crises. In science, his best memorials are the great institutions he built, the finest of which, of course, is the Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute of Palode in Kerala, India.

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