

New appointments

Dr Vasant R. Gowariker, 62, has been appointed and has taken-over as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Pune. He was Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Science and Technology during 1986–91. Gowariker was designated as the Adviser to the Prime Minister on Science and Technology during 1991–93.

He was earlier Director of the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre, Thiruvananthapuram.

Dr Abraham E. Muthunayagam, 56, has been appointed and has taken-over as Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Ocean Development. Muthunayagam has made distinguished

contributions to the early development of the propulsion systems for India's launch vehicles and satellites and subsequently to the organization of the much larger efforts. Muthunayagam's last-held position in ISRO was that of Director, Liquid Propulsion Systems Centre, Thiruvananthapuram.

SCIENTIFIC CORRESPONDENCE

Comments on 'Endemic, rare and threatened flowering plants of South India'

[*Curr. Sci.*, 1995, 68, 493–495]

The correspondence by Ranjit Daniels *et al.*^{1,2} in *Current Science* is both stimulating and thought-provoking.

The conclusion on p. 494 that 'certain families do have more number of threatened species than others' drew my attention in particular. Is it an evolutionary phenomenon: the older taxa on the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder, having spent their allotted time, are now gradually on their way out (as is the case with the 'living fossil' *Ginkgo biloba*)? Alternatively, some other factor may be involved, for instance, the fact that the habitats of these taxa are more prone to human interference than those of the others.

Tropical evergreen forests tend to be dominated by relatively few species. If they continue to be exploited during logging operations, they would progressively become more and more rare along with their epiphytic complement. Species like *Anacolosa densiflora* and *Dipterocarpus bourdillonii* find a frequent mention in the working plans of the earlier years but today their occurrence is not that very common in the forests of the Western Ghats. As the working plans do not miss the conspicuous species, their mention is a good indication of the species being common. The fact that *D. bourdillonii* is a choice species for the plywood industry explains the shrinkage in the area of its distribution

The geographic demarcation of the study area of Ranjit Daniel *et al.*² left this author somewhat confused: South India (the very title and p. 494, 2nd para), Tamil Nadu (p. 494, 1st para), Southern peninsula equated to ex-Madras Presidency³ (p. 494, 1st para). Gamble's³ Flora of Madras Presidency covers a far greater area (encompassing Kerala, Karnataka up to Shimoga and Andhra Pradesh up to Ganjam) than that of Tamil Nadu.

This author is not a statistician but wonders whether restricting the family size of the ten critical families to Tamil Nadu proper rather than to the erstwhile Madras Presidency would alter the conclusion about the threatened species being confined to certain families.

One cannot help feeling that a reference to Nair *et al.*'s^{4,5} flora of Tamil Nadu would have yielded more relevant information than to Gamble's³. The former flora has the added advantage of indicating the endemic, endangered, rarity status of the species on a platter without referring to Nayar and Sastri^{6,7,8}, who made a brilliant, pioneering effort in identifying the threatened plants.

Field surveys yield data that are accurate but very time-consuming. The next best alternative is to have recourse to literature survey, which in all cases does not prove to be 'Alladin's lamp'. Thus, the unknown entities range in number

from 2 (out of 171) in Table 1 (p. 494) on life-forms to 47 in Table 3 on latitudinal range, 55 in Table 4 on physiognomy and a whopping 108 (64%) in Table 5 on habitate.

Species not collected in herbaria for several decades have been one of the yardsticks for judging the rarity status of the species, but what about the new finds, species described for the first time! This in a way may also point to the rarity of the taxa, what failed to be collected and identified over decades and even a century. On the other hand, it may also express the enthusiasm of the botanist to probe the plant material into greater depths and unveil the critical characters unscrutinized earlier to witness the birth of a new species. The Botanical Survey of India since its reorganization and dedicated taxonomists have done yeoman service in bringing new taxa to light in spite of the receding forest cover of the country and dwindling plant resources.

1. Ranjit Daniels, R. J. and Patil, V. *Curr. Sci.*, 1995, 68, 243.
2. Ranjit Daniels, R. J., Anil Kumar, V. and Jayanthi, M., *Curr. Sci.*, 1995, 68, 493–495.
3. Gamble, J. S., *Flora of the Madras Presidency*, Bishen Singh Mahendra Singh, Dehra Dun, 1987, pp. 2017.
4. Nair, N. C., Henry, A. N., Kumari, G. R. and Chuthra, V. *Flora of Tamil Nadu, India*,