

A. G. K. Menon

Born to illustrious parents on 19 April 1921, Ambat Gopalan Kutty Menon, brought accolades to the distinguished Ambat clan. His father was a doctor in the Pasteur Institute, Coonoor. Menon had his early education in the Government High School, Chittoor. He graduated from the Madura College, Madurai and took his postgraduate degree from the Presidency College, Chennai. He obtained his doctoral degree in 1952 as a student of S. L. Hora and several years later his D Sc from the Madras University. Menon married the grand-daughter of the Late Maharaja of Kochi in 1953.

Widely acclaimed as the foremost ichthyologist and zoogeographer of the present century, A. G. K. Menon breathed his last on 11 April 2002. With an active scientific career spanning 50 years, beginning as a research scholar in 1948 under the guidance of late Sunder Lal Hora, the most eminent ichthyologist of India, Menon remained dedicated to his research, travelled widely, and worked on several groups of fishes. Hora initiated him to the studies of his famous theory on the distribution of the Malayan flora and fauna in Peninsular India – the ‘Satpura Hypothesis’. Initially Menon studied the Eastern Ghats ichthyofauna and the findings published in 1950 strongly supported the Satpura Hypothesis. Later, through his intensive investigations and critical analysis of the distribution of fishes in the Himalayas and fossil records of the Shiv-aliks, Menon was able to reorient the concept of Hora’s Satpura Hypothesis.

His paper on the fish geography of the Himalayas shows that the region had derived its fish fauna from the South Chinese region and this fauna had moved westwards as far as Africa. His subsequent paper on the ‘Age of the transgression of the Bay of Bengal and its significance in the evolution of the freshwater fish fauna of India’ throws light on factors facilitating the southwestward migration of the fauna to the peninsula.

Menon’s *Checklist of Fishes of the Himalayas and the Indo-Gangetic Plains* is an example where the distribution of the torrential stream fishes along the Himalayas is explained in terms of the palaeogeography of the region. The importance of zoogeographical studies in the advancement of our knowledge of the phy-

logeny, especially of widely distributed groups of animals, has been brought out clearly in the ichthyological contributions, viz. ‘Monograph of the Cyprinid fishes of the genus *Garra* Hamilton’ and ‘A systematic monograph of the tongue soles of the genus *Cynoglossus* Hamilton Buchanan (Pisces: Cynoglossidae)’. The latter monograph on flat fishes was published in 1977 by the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA, Menon was in fact the first Indian to contribute data to the FAO fish identification sheets.



Unlike most other ichthyologists, Menon specialized in both marine and freshwater species. He has published over 100 scientific papers, of which several were monographs and included descriptions of 43 new species – ranging from the torrent-dwelling schizothoracine fish from Kumaon to a blind catfish from a deep well in Kottayam. Several fish species have been named after Menon by other ichthyologists.

After his superannuation in 1978 as the Deputy Director in the Southern Regional Station of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), Chennai, Menon worked as an Associate Professor in the Marine Biology Division of the University of Dare es Salaam, Tanzania. Three years later he returned to serve as an Emeritus Scientist in the Southern Regional Station, ZSI during which period two fauna volumes on Homalopteridae and Cobitidae were completed and published in the years 1987 and 1992 respectively. Both these groups are of considerable interest from a zoogeographical point of view, to ichthyologists in general and Indian ichthyology in particular.

Menon’s relentless enthusiasm kept him active even in his later seventies when he handled a project on the large barbs of the west-flowing rivers of India. During the course of his study, he discovered several new species and discussed the endemism and uniqueness of each west-flowing river compared to the east-flowing rivers. Menon opposed introduction of exotic species. His book on the indigenous larvivorous fishes of India recommends several Indian species for larvicidal purpose. His in-depth study on Indian fishes resulted in two monumental works, viz. the *Threatened Fishes of India* and *Checklist of the Freshwater Fishes of India*. The latter was published in 1999 while the former, due to unforeseen circumstances, is still in press. Similarly, his systematic revision of the Cyprinid fish genus *Puntius* had to be left unfinished due to his failing health.

Menon was a member of the Fish Specialist Group of the IUCN, and also the Founder President of the Indian Society of Ichthyologists. The journal *Matsya*, exclusively devoted to ichthyological research was ambitiously started by him; and 17 volumes of this journal have been published till date. Menon wanted to start a separate school of ichthyology, housing his valuable library and fish specimens for promoting further studies. He donated all his books and collections to the Southern Regional Station, ZSI.

Menon’s efforts brought recognition to the Southern Regional Station, ZSI as a research centre of the Madras University, and he guided several doctoral students. He wanted to make ZSI a deemed institution devoted to the study of systematics and for imparting the nuances of this most fundamental, yet the most neglected branch of science.

Menon was not only a great scientist, but also a thorough gentleman. He was kind and helpful to anyone who approached him. He is survived by his wife and daughter. Menon’s legacy will continue through his many students and colleagues whose lives he had touched.

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