

T. V. Desikachary (1919–2005)

Thamarapu Vedanta Desikachary, an eminent phycologist of India and a legend in algal research, passed away on 5 November 2005 at the residence of his second son T. Sridhar at Melbourne, Australia. India has lost a giant, leaving a big vacuum in the subject Algology.

Desikachary was born in Tirupati, the famous abode of Lord Venkateshwara of seven hills on 18 September 1919, into a family of erudite scholars intimately connected with the temple. He was educated at the Hindu High School, Tirupati and at the Presidency College, Madras. He obtained the MSc degree in 1944 and PhD in 1951 working under M. O. P. Iyengar. He served as demonstrator in Andhra University, Assistant Professor, Pachaiyappa's College, Madras, Junior Lecturer at University of Madras and Lecturer at the Saugar University. He rejoined the University of Madras in 1957. He got his DSc in 1963 and was appointed as Professor at the University in 1964, a post he held till 1975. He played a major role in making Madras one of the centres of Indian Phycology and in doing so became one of the leaders in Phycology in India. In addition, he guided the research of over twenty doctoral students, at Chepauk campus originally occupied by Iyengar and later at the Guindy campus.

Desikachary published a large number of research papers in diverse groups of algae. The books published and edited by him include: *A monograph on the Cyanophyta, Taxonomy and Biology of Blue Green Algae, Marine Plants and Volvocales*. He published the volumes on Rhodophyta and Phaeophyta with Balakrishnan and Krishnamurthy and the monumental *Atlas of Indian Diatoms* in five volumes with his colleagues.

Desikachary took up a large amount of unpublished material, left behind by Iyengar and published these as a series, entitled 'Contributions to our knowledge of South Indian Algae' from 1967. He humbly confessed that... 'It has been an embarrassing duty for me to edit these for the press. Aware of my limitations, I have endeavoured to present his observations to the best of my abilities'.

Desikachary has nurtured and built up the phycological tradition left behind by Iyengar. He established a culture collection of algae at the University of Madras. He was the first Indian algologist to under-

take electron microscopic studies of diatom frustules and highlight the implications in taxonomy. He was the first to initiate use of numerical methods in the taxonomy of blue green algae. His interests in diatoms included study of both living and fossil diatoms. He has also made significant contributions (with Sundaralingam)



towards elucidation of phylogeny and interrelationships in the Charophytes. Critical studies have also been made by him on the morphology and life histories of red algae (on the Nematiales by himself and Balakrishnan) and on the coral-line red algae (with Ganesan). He established genera for commemorating Iyengar and other illustrious figures in Phycology: *Iyengariella* (Cyanophyceae); *Iyengariomonas*; *Papenfussiomonas*, *Schilleriomonas* and *Mantoniella* (Chlorophyceae, Prasinophyceae) and *Rossiella* (Bacillariophyceae). He strongly put forth Iyengar's hypothesis regarding the origin and evolution of the filamentous habit and also postulated that the development of parenchymatous thalli in many algae are modifications of the palmelloid habit. The observations that in the 'truly' parenchymatous tissues, plasmodesmata between adjacent (and genetically related) cells get dissociated prior to cell division leading to vegetative and sexual reproduction and prior to meiosis, led him (along with Swamy) to postulate that isolation and insulation are key processes in the vital phenomena of sexual reproduction and reduction division in living systems as also the survival of genetically altered cells, such as zygotes meiocytes, *in situ* mutants, etc. He organized the Interna-

tional Symposia on Taxonomy and Biology of Blue Green Algae in 1970 and Taxonomy of Algae in 1974 at the University of Madras, thus bringing about an interaction between leading phycologists from other lands and younger Indian phycologists. He was instrumental in the organization of the M.O.P. Iyengar Birth Centenary in 1986, which was celebrated with great enthusiasm by an international workshop followed by a symposium. He delivered the Prof. Birbal Sahni Memorial Lecture at Lucknow in 2001 and the Y. Bharadwaja endowment lectures at Banaras Hindu University in 2002.

Desikachary has worked on red algae with G. F. Papenfuss, University of California, Berkeley, and at the Cryptogamic Museum, Paris, and British Museum of Natural History, London.

Desikachary was a Fellow of the Indian Academy of Sciences, a Fellow of the Indian National Science Academy and a Fellow of the Phycological Society of India. He was the chief editor of *Phykos*, member of the editorial boards of *Phycologia*, the *Indian Journal of Marine Sciences* and *Hydrobiologia*. He was recipient of Sir C. V. Raman Medal of the University of Madras and the Prof. V. Puri Gold Medal of the Indian Botanical Society. Recently he was honoured by the American Phycological Association for his lifetime contribution at the International Phycological Congress, Durban, in August 2005.

During his last days, he was preparing the manuscript for the volume on Dinoflagellates and the description and keys for his diatom atlas. I had the opportunity to be associated with him from 1969 and feel that a great teacher and scholar will be missed. The encouragement and enthusiasm he initiated and inculcated will remain forever.

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The demise of T. V. Desikachary (TVD) in Melbourne, Australia removes from our midst a friendly figure whose contributions to algology brought international recognition to him and to the country. His early training was with M. O. P. Iyengar who pioneered studies on algae in India in the University Botany Laboratory (UBL) at Madras. Among Iyengar's students, it was given to Desikachary to pursue relentlessly the work initiated by his teacher and bring it to the heights it attained. Like his teacher, he remained active till the end. The last I saw him was when we had invited him to deliver the Birbal Sahni lecture at the Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeobotany in Lucknow not long ago and we were delighted when he came and delivered the lecture, despite his age. I found him agile, alert, and fully himself. Later, I was happy when the *Journal of Biosciences* published an invited article from him about his teacher, arising from the current interest in *Volvox* and *Volvocales* which Iyengar had made peculiarly his own long ago.

I had known Desikachary for over six decades, intimately for over five decades. We had been competitors for positions, with no intention of competing though, co-operators in common endeavours and yet unyielding and uncompromising in our views, but always keeping above everything the future of science and the growth of the institution foremost in our minds. The first time our names figured together was in 1944 when, on passing the Honours examination with a first class first from the Presidency College, Madras, I applied for the post of Demonstrator in Botany on the advice and recommendation of my teachers in the College. Desikachary, who had an MSc by research, earned by working with Iyengar, also happened to be an applicant. At the interview, the Principal told me I could not be selected, despite the recommendation of my teachers, because I was a Cochinite. Nor was Desikachary selected, for reasons not known. Eventually, I joined the UBL as a research scholar where I befriended Iyengar's students who were still around, including Desikachary.

Desikachary taught in the Pachaiyappa's College in Madras and in the Saugar University in Madhya Pradesh for some years. In the meantime, I had been appointed to a Lecturership and later promoted to a

Readership in the UBL. When a Lecturership eventually fell vacant at the UBL, Desikachary was appointed. Thereafter, our friendship grew further. Life always had its ups and downs, and TVD was always a dependable support to me giving solace in times of distress. He was of a happy-go-lucky nature, remarkably robust and bore reversals or let-downs with equanimity. He was fond of good and tasty food and had a weakness for sweets and ice cream which he would offer with gusto to his friends and even acquaintances. As we say, he was large-hearted. During the years we were together in the UBL we were inseparable, and transparently so, and I used to enjoy his company although I was never so good in eating, nor had I any special liking for movies such as he had. By and large, our being together was a way of unburdening unwanted thoughts or fears, of the enjoyment of common pleasures, and of mutually enriching our professional potential and strategy, particularly in fostering the study of cryptogams. If I had a hidden interest in algae, his interest in fungi was a visible one. We were committed taxonomists, although I lacked his legal acumen that is essential to grapple with nomenclatorial rules and formalities. And Desikachary would argue his case defiantly, and beautifully. It was part of his mental make-up. Both physically and mentally, he was a strong person with clearly defined objectives, to which he stuck till the end. He never cared how he dressed or what others thought of his dress or, for that matter, of his work. When the University introduced rotation of headships and Desikachary was asked to take over the headship, he stubbornly declined and even went on sick leave, and never relented.

When a newly created Professorship in Plant Pathology was advertised in 1958, it was Desikachary who brought it to my notice and wanted me to apply. My Readership in the UBL was good enough for me as I was happy and was going on merrily with my work on fungi. Desikachary and my mentor (Sadasivan) prevailed on me to apply and face the interview. My mentor held the view that I had every chance of being selected, but could always decide not to accept. However, when I was selected, I was prevailed on to accept the appointment in what was

said to be the larger interests of development of plant pathology in the country!

Whether in Delhi or in Rajasthan, where I moved later, I was in correspondence with my friend. He would write to me now and then when there was really something to write about. We were concerned about each other. It was around this time that the UBL was given the status of a Centre for Advanced Study and the UGC created a Chair in Mycology. My mentor wanted me back at the UBL in the new position that was open. I replied to him immediately that I was already holding a Professorship and Headship in Jaipur and, since Desikachary had been with him (and not deserted him like me), in all fairness, he needed to be accommodated first. My mentor replied by return mail to say how very difficult it has been to convince the UGC about the creation of one Chair, and it would be impossible to get one more, and therefore I must reconsider my stand. Once again, despite my respect for my mentor, I felt professional ethics would not permit my aspiring for the position. I therefore replied to him again reiterating my feelings in the matter. My mentor did not write again and was silent, and I knew he was annoyed, if not angry, with me. I felt sorry and did not know what I should do. A month or two later, my mentor wrote to me that he had met the Vice-Chancellor and surrendered a Readership and a Lecturership in the Department against which a Professorship was being created specifically for Algology and he asked me, 'will you now come?' I was now happy, and felt relieved, having two birds with a single shot, so it seemed – a permanent position for my dear friend, and the continuance of Algology as a major discipline in the UBL.

Desikachary's early work was on blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) and he crowned it with a monograph which was published by the ICAR. It earned for him instant recognition from algologists worldwide. Later, he worked with Papenfuss in Berkeley in the University of California on red algae. His attention now came to be focused on red algae, and marine algae in general. He embraced the diatoms too, including fossil diatoms, pioneering work on which had been done earlier by Iyengar and R. Subrahmanyam. He had ideas on Charales on which pioneering

work had been done by B. P. Pal (the distinguished plant geneticist), working in the University in Rangoon, and by V. S. Sundaralingam working with Iyengar. Desikachary's publication of Iyengar's unpublished work, especially on the Chlorophyceae-Volvocales, is a worthy *pushpanjali* to his great teacher. All this reflects his versatility and scholarship, and determination to achieve specific ends.

No script about Desikachary would be complete without mention of his wife Chellammal, his utterly devoted and selfless partner in life. Having known the family well, I should say she was self-effacing, soft-spoken, kind and generous to those who visited the family, whether close friends or mere acquaintances. Indeed, she is the lady behind the man.

In Desikachary's demise, I have lost a long-time, close friend. Algology has lost

a stalwart. We will not find another Desikachary.

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