

Dr. V. J. Nair - A Tribute to the illustrious Agrostologist of Contemporary India



Dr. Velukutty Jayachandran Nair, an octogenarian, peacefully passed away on 17th February, 2021 at Coimbatore at his residence. He was fondly referred to by his colleagues and friends as V.J. Nair and is one of the renowned specialists on grasses of India.

Dr. V.J. Nair was born on April 2, 1940 at Kottayam, Kerala. His father Velukutty Nair was a police officer and mother Ammukutty Amma, a home maker. He was the first son in his family followed by brother Sashi and sisters Lathika and Geetha. He did his schooling in several places in Kerala due to his father's transferrable job. He was very good at mathematics and wanted to study mathematics for his degree but due to insistence of his father to study science, he joined the B.Sc. Botany course in Kerala University which he completed in 1958. He obtained M.Sc. (Botany) degree in 1961 and Ph.D. degree in Botany in 1970 from Rajasthan University, Jaipur, India.

Dr. Nair started his research career modestly as Scientific Assistant at the Botanical Survey of India

(BSI), Northern Circle, Dehradun in 1961 and chose the family Poaceae, a challenging group for most the taxonomists. He held various positions in BSI: Orchidarium Keeper, Botanist, Systematic Botanist, Scientist SD, Scientist SE and became Head of the Office, BSI, Eastern Circle, Shillong, Meghalaya. He then was posted as Indian Liaison officer at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, United Kingdom and served at Kew for two years from Sept. 1992 – Sept. 1994. He was posted back as Scientist SE, BSI, Coimbatore, where he continued his service and superannuated on 30th April, 1998. Dr. Nair had completed an impressive and impeccable service that spanned for nearly half a century.

During his continuous research career, he succeeded in the discovery of two new grass genera (*Chandraskharania* V.J.Nair *et al.*, *Silentvalleya* V.J.Nair *et al.*) and 36 species new to science. He was much sought after for his service to provide Latin diagnosis which he provided for no less than 1500 new plant and fungi taxa described from India. He authored four books and 91 research papers in peer reviewed National and International journals. He guided nine Ph.D. students in plant taxonomy. He was an editor and reviewer for many scientific journals of International repute and served as a subject specialist in several committees constituted by various central agencies. In recognition of his contributions in plant taxonomy and conservation biology, the Indian Association for Angiosperms Taxonomy, Calicut, awarded him the V.V Sivarajan Gold medal in 1996. He received the prestigious Dr. E.K. Janaki Ammal National Award 2008 for Plant Taxonomy, instituted by MOEF, Govt. of India., from the President of India, the late Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam in 2010.

Dr. Nair was a very simple, down to earth person and easily approachable. He was always calm and rarely cracked jokes to his colleagues when sharing

lighter moments. He even joyously commented once, “to see my students, I have to get permission from their PAs. I am proud to see their achievements”. He used to burn the midnight oil in correcting the Ph.D. theses of his students. After retirement, he settled in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu and continued his research work as Emeritus Scientist at the Botanical Survey of India where he served as a Coordinator of All India Coordinated projects on Taxonomy, initiated by the Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of India, dealing with Poaceae of India and rendered his help in editing the manuscripts on revision of the South Indian Paniceae (Poaceae) and revision of

Amaryllidaceae and Hypoxidaceae for India till his last breath.

He was an ardent lover of cricket and never missed any of the matches shown live on TV. He was survived by his wife, Baby J. Nair and by a son Mr. J. Vineeth Nair and a daughter Ms. Anjali Nair. His demise is a great loss to the taxonomic fraternity in India, and the void created by his physical departure will be felt for quite some time by the Indian taxonomic community. May his soul rest in peace.

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