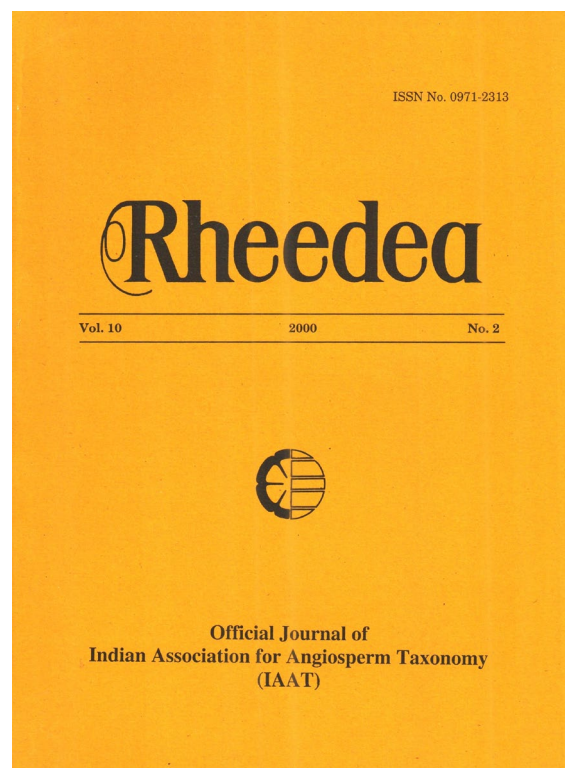




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Legume diversity in India : An overview



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Legumes are a fascinating group of flowering plants and are next only to cereals in their economic importance. Among the flowering plants they are unique for their ability to fix atmospheric nitrogen for producing protein rich seeds, which form a major source of vegetable protein, consumed by man and his domesticated animals. Leguminosae (*nom. alt.* Fabaceae) are third largest family of flowering plants (after Orchidaceae and Compositae) with about 700 genera and over 19000 species in the world. In India, there are about 199 genera and 1252 species (23 subspecies and 109 varieties). Some genera like *Astragalus*, *Crotalaria*, *Desmodium* and *Indigofera* show explosive adaptive radiation with species ranging from 60 to 115. The members of this family also show a great diversity in their life forms ranging from a tiny herb to giant forest trees and occupy a wide range of ecological niches across all altitudinal and latitudinal gradients. The highest concentration of Legumes are in Peninsular India (c. 550 species) and northeast India including eastern Himalayas (c. 680 species) corresponding to two hotspot areas in India. Two genera, viz. *Hardwickia* and *Moullava* are endemic in India. Other genera like *Humboldtia* and *Eleiotis* are endemic to India and Sri Lanka; *Indopitadenia* and *Ougienia* to India and Nepal and *Leptodesmia* to India and Madagascar. About 262 species (belonging to 78 genera) are endemic to India: 45 of these have been identified as belonging to various red-list categories. Some species like *Humboldtia bourdilloni*, *Gleditsia assamica*, etc. have never been collected after type collections, while some like *Humboldtia unijuga*, *Gymnocladus assamicus*, *Cynometra bourdilloni*, *Cynometra beddomei*, *Dialium travancoricum*, *Inga cynometroides* could be relocated and collected after over a century. Many legumes are multipurpose species, apart from being a direct source of food, and they yield products like drugs, resins, tannins, saponins, gums and a variety of timber products. They are also grown as ornamentals, forage, crops, fast growing trees and green manure crops.

* Abstract of the Prof. V.V. Sivarajan Medal Lecture delivered on 10th November 2000 during the 10th Annual conference of the Indian Association for Angiosperm Taxonomy held at North Bengal University, Siliguri, West Bengal.