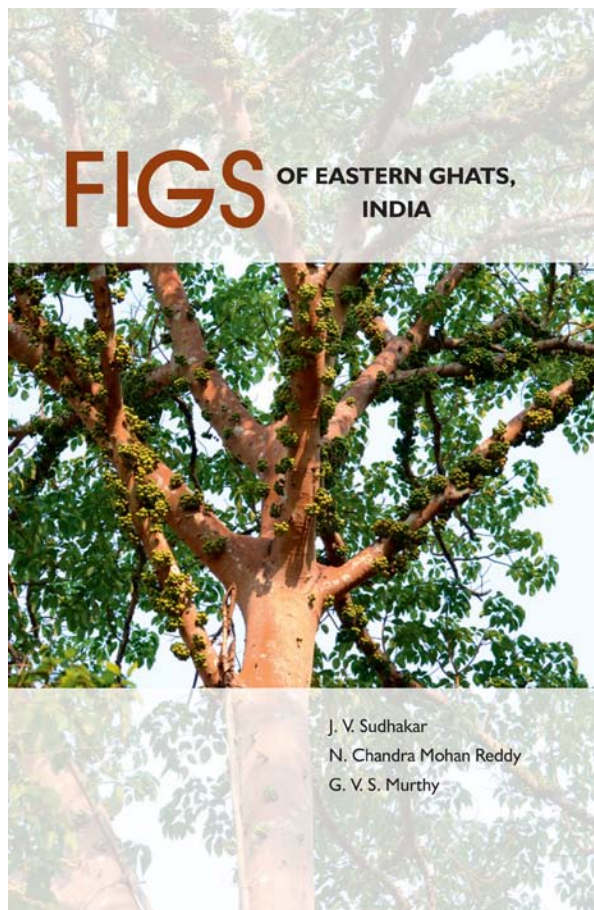


Book Review

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Figs of Eastern Ghats, India

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Several times in the past I criticized hardcore taxonomists for presenting their findings in the most inappropriate ways thereby disallowing end users to appreciate the value of taxonomy and the great efforts taken in achieving it. To lay public, policy makers and the beginners in taxonomy such books are an impenetrable fortress. You can move around the tall walls but cannot go inside. What is the fun in creating such secluded islands of isolation and solitude? I used to ask myself. Linnaeus never advocated this, and in the last 300 years we moved far away from Linnaeus and his philosophies. The book under review seriously

looks at these apprehensions and offers sensible and easy to emulate solutions. It is beautifully designed and pleasingly produced with due care for end users. Taxonomically this book is strong and aesthetically lovely to go through.

The book is prefixed with a message of Prof. M.S. Swaminathan and a foreword by Prof. Madhav Gadgil. In the preface the authors describe the scope of the work and its potential end users. The whole book is divided into seven chapters followed by a glossary, author abbreviations, references and index. It also contains a coloured map of the area, geographic and vegetation features, climatic data, composition of diverse vegetation types and a passing mention on the animal wealth as well. In its geography and origin, Eastern Ghats is not comparable to the Western Ghats, which is almost a continuous range except a break at 11° N. While Eastern Ghats is a broken chain of hills appropriately to be called Eastern Hills (See M.S. Mani in Ecology and Biogeography in India: 197-203. 1974).

A few features of Moraceae are mentioned to take us straight to the genus *Ficus*, its diversity, root system, leaves (symmetry, shape and size, petioles, waxy glands and cystoliths), stipules, syconium, flowers, bracts, pollination and seed dispersal and finally classification of figs are dealt with in details. Colour pictures of diverse root system, line drawings of different leaf shapes and stipules and microphotographs of different flowers are also added to make the book very useful. Line drawings of syconium and diverse flowers add beauty to the book. Chapter 2 deals with pollination ecology and refers to the role of fig wasps in detail. Fig fruits are very nutritious and are relished by a wide variety of animals including human beings. This has been mentioned in the foreword by Madhav Gadgil himself. The concept of keystone mutualists in different ecosystems developed using many tree species such as *Casearia*, *Ficus*, etc., as model plants. Henry Howe who studied the case in

Central America found out the dependence of a wide variety of animals including birds solely on the fruits of *Casearia* in a long period. It is more so in the case of *Ficus*, which produces fruits almost round the year serving very bird species like many species of hornbills. Chapter 3 stresses on the economic importance of figs in various ways. Being very hardy, figs are being widely used as bonsai plants and a small section shows the current interest in bonsai making. Chapter 4 deals with propagation, multiplication and care of fig trees showing demonstration in colour. Chapter 5 forms the biggest part of the book. It provides keys to wild figs of Eastern Ghats dealing 27 species. Keys are constructed using contrasting characters and hence easy to use. Each species is dealt in this fashion – scientific binomial, synonym(s), etymology, local names, habit, leaves, stipules, figs, flowering and fruiting period, habitat, distribution and uses, all supplemented with colour pictures. Chapter 6 deals with cultivated figs, of which there are about 10 in the area. Under chapter 7 monumental figs some striking examples of *Ficus* that attained huge sizes and living over a longer time are depicted with

colour pictures and comments. This includes the Banyan in Telangana, Thimmamma Marrimanu in Kadiri, Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh, Great Banyan Tree of AJC Bose Indian Botanic Garden, Howrah, etc., all illustrated in colour. This is followed by a glossary and abbreviations, references and index. The leaves are splendidly pasted at beginning and end. I was floored by the different colours of young leaves of figs at the end. It was visual treat so also the book.

I congratulate the authors for the great work they have accomplished. Let this book inspire others to look at their surroundings for more figs and come up with a similar contribution so that we can safely say that taxonomy is flourishing in India.

The book is priced Rs. 600/- and it is worth to possess a copy. I recommend this book for all who love plants in general and trees in particular.

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