

Dharni Dhar Awasthi (1922–2011)

Dharni Dhar Awasthi, India's leading lichenologist for more than seven decades, passed away on 21 August 2011 in Lucknow. He was born on 28 September 1922 as the second son of Hari Ballabh and Chandra Devi Awasthi in Naret village, Pithoragarh District, Uttarakhand. Awasthi received his primary education from Naret, his high school from Pithoragarh and Intermediate from Almora District, Uttarakhand.

Awasthi did his BSc and MSc (Botany) in 1943 and 1945 respectively, from Lucknow University. He joined the Department of Botany at Lucknow University as Research Assistant during 1945–46. Later on he worked in a stipendiary training programme in systematic botany and taxonomy for two years (1946–48) at the Botanical Garden and Herbarium, Calcutta (Kolkata). During this period, Awasthi got interested in the taxonomic studies of Indian lichens, which he pursued throughout his later life.

Back in Lucknow, Awasthi worked as a botanical assistant for about four years during 1948–52 at the National Botanical Garden (National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI), Lucknow). During this period he extensively explored the difficult and remote areas of the Himalayas and collected both angiosperms and lichens; these collections are presently preserved at NBRI, Lucknow herbarium. Awasthi travelled months together in difficult terrains of the Himalayas for plant exploration, since in those days one had to traverse long distances on foot, as no vehicular transport was available.

In 1952, Awasthi initiated work on the Indian lichens and obtained his first PhD degree in botany from Lucknow University, under the guidance of S. N. Das Gupta in 1961. He got an opportunity to work as Fulbright Alumnus of the National Science Foundation, USA, for advanced training in lichenology under William A. Weber, at the University of Colorado (1960–63) and earned another PhD degree from that University. During his tenure at USA, Awasthi visited most of the European herbaria and gathered a large number of exsiccate specimens which helped him later in the authentic identification of Indian lichens. At present all of his personal herbarium specimens (herb.-AWAS) and those of the

Lucknow University herbarium (LWU) have been transferred on a permanent loan to NBRI, Lucknow (LWG). W. A. Weber, H. G. Rodeck (Colorado University), O. A. Hoeg (Oslo) and several other European lichenologists helped Awasthi in making available the rare literature on lichens, which enabled him to carry forward the lichenological studies in India.



In 1963, Awasthi vigorously pursued taxonomical studies on Indian lichens. He explored the phytogeographical regions of the country for collection of lichens together with some of the lichen-rich sites in Nepal. The vast research work carried out by Awasthi enabled him to publish an important book entitled, *Catalogue of the Lichens from India, Nepal, Pakistan and Ceylon* (1965). He also brought out a monograph of the lichen genus *Dirinaria* (1975) on a world-wide basis. Later, he keyed out the macro and microlichens of India, Nepal and Sri Lanka (1988, 1991). For beginners in the field of lichenology in India he published, *A Handbook of Lichens* (2000) and a *Compendium of the Macrolichens from India, Nepal and Sri Lanka* (2007).

Awasthi also established a personal library which comprised of both rare and ancient updated literature on lichens. His personal lichen herbarium also represents some of the most unique and important lichen taxa collected from difficult terrain of the Himalayas. He alone or jointly revised more than 70 genera of lichens and described more than 75 species. Financial support through various

Government agencies enabled him to establish a centre of lichenological studies in the country with a well-developed herbarium.

For his outstanding contribution in the field of this rare branch of botany, Awasthi received the Prof. P. Maheshwari Memorial Lecture of Indian National Science Academy (INSA) in 1991, was elected a Fellow of the Indian Academy of Sciences in 1978 and Fellow of INSA in 1984. The distinguished services of Awasthi towards the field of lichenology were also recognized internationally, when the International Association for Lichenology honoured him with the prestigious Acharius Medal in 1992. This medal is named after the famous lichenologist Eric Acharius, the father of lichenology. Awasthi was an Honorary Member of the British Lichen Society since 1993, and has often been referred to as the 'Father of Indian lichenology'. Some of the lichen genera and species named in his honour are *Awasthiella indica*, *Awasthia melanotricha*, *Anaptychia awasthii*, *Anthracotheicum awasthii*, *Arthothelium awasthii*, *Bottaria awasthii*, *Cryptothecia awasthii*, *Lobaria awasthiana*, *Coloplaca awasthii*, *Cladonia awasthiana* and *Hypotrachyna awasthii*.

Though the pioneer school of lichenology in India established by Awasthi closed down after his superannuation at Lucknow University in the nineties of the last century, his students extended this branch in various universities and organizations.

I had an opportunity to work closely with Awasthi from 1979 till his demise and found him to be a great mentor, a person with uncompromising ethics, compassion, commitment to duty, national pride and a human being par excellence. He had contributed immensely to the growth of lichenology in India and has paved the way for further research on this rare and unique branch of botany.

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