

K. S. Venkataramani (1924–2010)

In the demise of K. S. Venkataramani on 29 December 2010 at Chennai, science has lost a distinguished horticulturist who devoted a lifetime to the cultivation of tea in its varied aspects in our country, notably in the Nilgiris in southern India. It is indeed sad to know that he had been ill with colon rectal cancer for the past three years.

Son of K. S. Sundaram Iyer and Lakshmi Ammal, Venkataramani was born on 17 January 1924 at Madras (now Chennai). His father retired as Magistrate in the service of what was then the composite Madras Presidency, serving in what is now Andhra Pradesh.

Venkataramani was educated at the Besant Theosophical School, Madanapalle, and graduated with a First Class First B Sc degree in botany from the Madras Christian College (MCC) in 1942. Working on Indian vegetables and fruits, he earned the M Sc degree by thesis with guidance from K. C. Naik, and the Ph D degree of the Madras University with guidance from T. S. Sadasivan. In 1948, he found his rightful place when appointed Botanist to the United Planters' Association of South India (UPASI), where he rose to the position of Director of Research in 1965. The shifting of the Tea Research Station, originally located at Devarshola in the Nilgiris, to Cinchona in the Annamalais was an onerous operation, which he completed successfully. He sought voluntary retirement in 1975, but continued to be a Consultant to the Tamil Nadu Tea Plantation Corporation and several plantations until about 1992. His opinion and advice was valued by many organizations such as CSIR and ICAR, and he had been on many state-level and national committees. For a short spell in 1959 he served as Reader in Horticulture in the Post Graduate School of the Agricultural Research Institute at Coimbatore.

As the first botanist at the UPASI Tea Research Station, Venkataramani had a challenging agenda which he tried to meet with conviction, confidence and courage. Problems arose in plantations and required solutions in the field. Quite clearly, he had to embrace all aspects of cultivation of tea, which is what horticulture is about. Though his special focus was on clonal selection, other related aspects such as plant protection received

his close attention. His excursions into the horticulture of other crops such as banana, rubber and coffee enriched his experience in meeting the challenges of tea cultivation with imagination and innovation. Venkataramani was a pioneer in tea clonal selection and vegetative propagation. His most significant contribution to the tea industry was a set of outstanding tea clones combining high yields with quality and resistance to drought and diseases. Many of these clones such as Sundaram, Athrey, Pandian, Golconda, Swarna, Jayaram and others,



are extensively planted in southern India. His analysis of the taxonomy of tea and tea clones in general cultivation in southern India¹ is a significant contribution. As Venkataramani noted, we see in the field a wide spectrum of tea populations showing variations in leaf form and other morphological features relevant in taxonomy. The populations range from the small-leaved *Camellia sinensis* to the long-leaved *Camellia assamica*. From analysis of populations in the field, the cultivated tea populations were held to be complex species hybrids. Venkataramani also contributed notably to the elucidation of plant nutrition in control of the vexed blister blight of tea caused by the fungus *Exobasidium vexans*; the response of tea bushes to foliar application of fertilizers and laboratory evaluation of copper fungicides, besides the chemical control of weeds. His manifold duties and commitment to development of tea took him to almost all tea-growing areas

in the country enabling him to comprehend the practices, principles and problems of development of tea in the broadest perspective. A list of his important publications on tea can be found in Hockings².

Early on in his career, Venkataramani had made contributions to our knowledge of the banana complex³ hybrid vigour in brinjal (*Solanum melongena*), blossom biology of vegetables such as *Hibiscus esculentus*, and vitamin C content of vegetables such as *Trigonella foenum-graecum*, reflecting his varied interests and versatility.

Venkataramani was elected to the Fellowship of the Indian Academy of Sciences in 1968. He was a Fellow of the Indian Academy of Horticultural Science and of the Indian Botanical Society. He was a recipient of the 'For the Sake of Honour Award' from the Rotary Club of Nilgiris and the Tea Research Lifetime Achievement Award from the Tea Board of India. In conferring the prestigious 'For the Sake of Honour Award' on him in 1976, the Rotary Club of Nilgiris felt 'happy and proud to be able to honour one such outstanding leader within its own community, our esteemed fellow-citizen of Kotagiri, Dr K. S. Venkataramani'. The scroll given to him said: 'his high sense of duty, integrity and honesty both as a scientist and as a man, are widely known and respected. Highly principled, he is uncompromising where ethics, good conduct and standards of performance are concerned. Dr Venkataramani believes in the religion of hard work. He has never cared or worried about rewards. He has put into practice the Rotary motto "Service above Self"'. In 1998, the Tea Board of India presented Venkataramani with its 'Tea Research Award for Lifetime Achievement' in the field of tea research and Development.

I knew Venkataramani from the time he joined the University Botany Laboratory at Madras in 1945 or 1946, where I had been doing research in soil mycology and soil-borne diseases of cotton. His simplicity, quietude, dedication to work, and self-effacing nature were obvious to me even then. Unobtrusive, he carried on with his work on blossom biology or vitamin C content of vegetables, as if nothing was happening around

PERSONAL NEWS

him. Such was his complete involvement and concentration in his work. He admired his teachers, notably A. J. Boyd, the distinguished and much respected Principal of MCC at that time. He would tell me about his association with Cherrian Jacob, the banana specialist in Coimbatore and his respect for S. N. Chandrasekhara Iyer, the botanist at the Institute in Coimbatore from whom he had learnt a great deal. As far as I could note, he had few interests other than horticulture in its broadest sense. Such was his intense passion for his science. To a question about his other interests or

hobbies, his wife Kanthamani once told me that he used to attend lectures at the Ramakrishna Math and he had a collection of Ramakrishna literature. Pondering over a lifetime devoted with passion and resolve to the development of tea by Venkataramani, I rejoice in the conviction that development of tea cannot just be mere science, but more pragmatically an art. There was in him the spark to combine both.

Venkataramani is survived by his wife, who is an organic chemist working on flavanoids involved in the flavour of tea.

1. Venkataramani, K. S., *Proc. Indian Acad. Sci., Sect. B*, 1974, **80**, 178–187.
2. Hockings, P., *Espaces Tropicaux*, 1996, **14**.
3. Venkataramani, K. S., *J. Indian Bot. Soc.*, 1955, **34**, 79–84.

C. V. SUBRAMANIAN

A8, Damayanthi Apartments,
17, South Mada Street,
Nungambakkam,
Chennai 600 034, India
e-mail: cvsutra1952@yahoo.co.in

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