

Life's history ends for a food scientist-historian

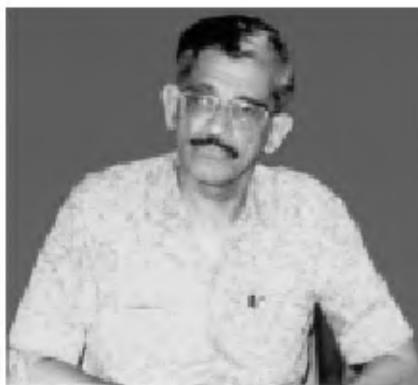
An obituary of K. T. Achaya

K. T. Achaya, an eminent oil chemist, food scientist, nutritionist, food historian and patron of art, music and literature died on 5 September 2002. Men like Achaya with knowledge and versatility bridging across science and arts, with ability to research, teach and write, were not born every day. Yet, he carried his brilliance and achievements with remarkable humility. His qualities of mind and heart won him friends and admirers across all fields, and in all age groups, but his shyness and unassuming nature prevented many more from knowing and recognizing him.

Born on 6 October 1923 at Kollegal, Thammu Achaya graduated in Chemistry Honours from Madras University in 1943 and spent the next three years at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bangalore working for M Sc (Madras University), and Associateship of IISc. His tryst with research in oils, fats and foods (ghee and animal fat) began at this early stage and his first book, *Indian Dairy Products* with K. S. Rangappa as co-author, appeared in 1948. This book, after extensive revision, was reprinted in 1974. It has become a bible in dairy science and a textbook for successive generations of students. Achaya got his doctorate degree from the University of Liverpool, UK working with the doyen of oil chemistry, T. P. Hilditch, on the subject of component glycerides of cow and buffalo ghee. This work was published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society*.

In 1950, the late Hussain Zahir picked up this brilliant scientist to establish a School of Fat Chemistry and Technology at the Central Laboratories of CSIR, in Hyderabad. The name of this institution was later changed to Regional Research Laboratory, Hyderabad and more recently to Indian Institute of Chemical Technology. During the 22 years spent by Achaya at RRL, Hyderabad, 150 research publications, 11 patents and 19 Ph Ds rolled out and the department received international recognition. The thrust of research was on cottonseed processing and castor-oil derivatives, both regional materials of commercial

importance. During this period Achaya had two research stints abroad – University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA and at NRC, Canada. At this stage, another profound publication, a book on *Cottonseed Chemistry and Technology* was published with K. S. Murti as co-author. This volume catalysed the emerging cottonseed industry and has gone into reprinting by CSIR. The work done by Achaya on castor oil has, in recent years, become the basis of a wide range of exported products, showing that his work had practical value and was not just ivory-tower exploitation, as lot of research in India tends to be.



Time came to move from oils and fats to wider pastures in proteins and nutrition. In 1971, Achaya moved from Hyderabad to Mumbai as Executive Director, Protein Foods and Nutrition Development Association of India. Under his stewardship, this association became a source of information to the industry, scientists and government. Numerous first drafts of what became standard specifications were prepared and annual well-focused workshops organized. A few ready-to-eat foods were developed and test-marketed. The idea was to manufacture inexpensive but nutritious processed foods, which could be marketed through the public distribution system, to reach the poor. Alas, this novel concept and attempt was not pursued. A popular book *Your Food and You* (National Book Trust) published at that time, has been translated into several Indian languages and reprinted re-

peatedly. It sells almost 15,000 copies a year.

In 1977, Achaya moved to the Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI), Mysore as Consultant to the United Nations University (UNU) Programme for advanced training in Food Science and Technology for fellows from developing countries. Several international workshops related to technology of processed foods, and institutional management were organized, the proceedings of which have become valuable resource material. An off-shoot of this period was yet another book, *Everyday Indian Processed Foods*, issued by National Book Trust (1984) and reprinted several times.

In 1983, Achaya retired from the CFTRI-UNU programme, to become CSIR Emeritus Scientist, and made a thorough study of the Indian oilcake system. This period sparked interest in the historical aspects of Indian foods and food industry – an interest he pursued till the end. A few well-researched books have emerged. They include: *Oilseeds and Oil Milling in India: A Cultural and Historical Survey* (1990), *GHANI: The Traditional Oil Mill of India* (1993), *The Food Industries of British India* (1994), and *The Story of our Food*. His recent book on Indian food, *A Historical Companion* (Oxford University Press, 1998) is a classic publication, well researched and illustrated. The kind of book that only an Indian steeped in Indian ethos, love for Indian history from ancient to modern times, eye for details, knowledge about foods, capacity for painstaking search in remote and not-so-remote libraries for documents in different languages and above all, brilliance, can write. It has received rave reviews from both the foreign and Indian press, and has already been reprinted and translated in other foreign languages. Oxford University Press has also brought out a smaller paper-back version, *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Foods* by Achaya. In addition to these books, Achaya has edited many others (the most recent being, *Interfaces between Agriculture, Nutrition, and Food Science – 2002*), and

PERSONAL NEWS

written valuable book chapters. The *Textbook of Human Nutrition* (1996) edited by the author of this obituary carries two valuable chapters by Achaya.

Achaya has served many societies, and has been the President of Oil Technologists' Association of India, Association of Food Scientists and Technologists of India, and Nutrition Society of India. He has been honoured with many awards, and was fellow of the National Academy of Agricultural Sciences.

Achaya's knowledge of Western classical and Indian classical music was profound. It is a pity, he did not write a book on the history of Indian music. In an article in *The Hindu* (25 February 2001) Rukun Advani writes: 'Non-fictional prose is an underrated art and the people who dish out Sahitya Akademi Awards do not seem to recognize the value of the sorts of books that 'Doc' Achaya has written. They ought to. No historian of India has contributed

as much as the scientist-historian K. T. Achaya towards our understanding of what nourishes us every day, of what really makes us what we are – the food we eat'.

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