

SIR AMARAVATI SASHIAH SASTRI, K.C.S.I., THE DEWAN OF PUDUKOTA :
A HITHERTO UNKNOWN PLANT COLLECTOR FROM SOUTHERN INDIA.

There were several amateurs who indulged in plant hunting, promoted gardening and encouraged the study of botany in southern India in the later half of the last century and in the first quarter of the present century, well ahead of their time and fellow-citizens. Unlike today, it was done with a conscious effort and honesty of purpose, more often privately and out of pleasure than as a profession. But unfortunately, their activities and contributions either went unrecorded or remained in dark when documented. Similarly, several Europeans, mostly coming from the British Isles who lent their hand to enhancing the knowledge of botany irrespective of their background (a training as Missionary Surgeons, Governors, Residents of Princely States, Revenue Board Members, Forest Officers, etc.), too did not get their due credit. Unless all these personalities are considered, with their individual contributions combined and connected, a true picture of the botanical history of southern India will never emerge.

The author, proposes to discuss the small but significant roles played by some of these forgotten personalities, both private and public, from botanical, social and historical standpoints. To start with here is the portrayal of the Dewan of Pudukota¹, a small princely state in the southeastern region of peninsular India, now in Tamil Nadu State. The name of the Dewan has never been connected with his botanical collections. Nor have the collections of Dewan ever found a place in the floristic accounts of the region appeared so far.

While scrutinising the old herbarium

specimens at Madras Herbarium (MH), the author came across certain collections from Pudukota made in the year 1886 by the Dewan of Pudukota. Neither the herbarium sheets or the Accession Register at MH gave a slightest hint as to who this



Dewan was. A critical search in old documents and biographies ultimately revealed the unequivocal link between the collections at MH and Sir A. Sashiah Sastri, the Dewan of Pudukota between 1878 and 1894.

¹ Pudukotah, Pudukottai, Pudukkottai, Poodoocottah, etc. are the other spellings used for the place in literature.

(a) *Botanical connection* : A. Sashiah² learnt his early lessons under the famous Mr (later Sir) Walter Elliot. In the words of his biographer (Aiyar, 1902 : 45)³ "Mr Elliot was an ardent antiquarian and every hour he could snatch from work he devoted to his botanical and archaeological researches. In his morning drives he would take Sashiah with him to assist him in collecting botanical specimens, inscriptions, copper-plates and other finds of antiquarian interest. He found an apt pupil in the young clerk". Sashiah's association with people such as Governors of Madras (who often indulged in activities like collecting plants, gardening, attending and participating in annual flower shows, etc.) perhaps helped him develop a special affection towards plants and gardens. Of course, when he left his village for education as a boy he took a bundle of reeds out of those that skirted his native stream (to improvise them into writing instruments to serve him in Madras metropolitan student life). It is unfortunate that the letters he wrote to his noted friends describing, besides the day-to-day activities, the lakes, landscape, flora and fauna which he saw while travelling through Northern Circars (when working in the Revenue Department with Mr Elliot) could not be traced and presumed to be lost (see Aiyar, 1902 : 47).

(b) *Botanical collections* : Sashiah's collections, numbering 31, representing 30 species of 21 angiosperm (dicot) families are available in MH (with collector's name as 'Dewan of Pudukotah'). His collections commenced in Feb. 1886⁴ and ended with March that

year. This was the time when the volumes of J. D. Hooker's '*The Flora of British India*' were appearing in print. Perhaps Sashiah's extra-activities might have come to an end with the demise of Rajah (His Highness Sri Brihadamba Das Raja Ramachandra) Tondaiman Bahadur of Pudukota on April 15, 1886 when more responsibilities bestowed on him.

(c) *Contributions to Gardens* : As Dewan of Pudukota, he revived and renovated the splendour and style of the large palace garden, the *Ananda Bagh*, at Pudukota, which was in a ruined state then. He helped to improve the *Public Garden and Zoo* at Trivandrum as Dewan of Travancore (1872-1877) by providing all the encouragement to Rev. Mr. Pettigrew (Chaplain of Govt. High Church) who was its secretary at that time and who considers Sashiah Sastri as 'an honest man in the noblest work of God'. Sashiah Sastri became a member of Agri-horticultural Society of Madras in 1883 and used to attend the annual flower shows organised by it.

(d) *A brief biographical sketch of Sir Amaravati Sashiah Sastri* : Born at Amaravati on March 22, 1828 in Tanjore (=Thanjavur) district in the erstwhile Madras Presidency (now Tamil Nadu); educated at Madras; student of Rev. John Anderson and Mr. E. B. Powell; married to Sundari in 1847; joined as a clerk in Revenue Board in 1848; worked under Mr. Walter Elliot; was Tahsildar of Masulipatam in 1850, sent select items for the famous 'London Exhibition' of 1851 and won medals and tokens of appreciation from Queen Victoria of Great Britain; Head Sheristadar in 1855; became Fellow of Madras University in 1865; Dewan of Travancore between May 1872 and Aug. 1877; received C.S.I. in 1878; Sirkele, Dewan and Devan-Regent of Pudukota between Aug. 1878 and Nov. 1894; honest and commanded respect from all Governors

² The word 'Sastri' was added to his name by mistake in a Gazette notification; it later ornamented his name.

³ Aiyar, B. V. Kamesvara 1902. *Sir A. Sashiah Sastri, K. C. S. I., An Indian Statesman: A Biographical Sketch*. Srinivasa Varadachari & Co., Madras. 408 pp.

⁴ It is not known whether this has got any connection or it marks the visit (in the first week of Feb. 1886) of the Right Hon'ble Sir Mountstuart Elphinstone Grant-Duff, Governor of Madras (1881-1886), who often used to collect plants wherever he went.

of Madras of his time ; K.C.S.I. in 1902 ; and died on Oct. 29, 1903.

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CATAMIXIS BACCHAROIDES THOMS.—AN ENDEMIC CHASMOPHYTE OF THE W. HIMALAYA UNDER THREAT

The genus *Catamixis* is monotypic : its component species (*C. baccharoides* Thoms.) is endemic to the Western Himalaya, confined to the narrow range in the Siwalik belt and Tehri district of Garhwal. This rare plant could well be on the verge of extinction by the turn of this century, threatened by indiscriminate mining and quarrying operations being carried out in its natural range of distribution.

The early Tertiary zone of the outer Siwalik that surrounds the tectonic Siwalik and Palaeocene belt, has deposits of Eocene coal and bauxite. The adjoining Tehri district from which *C. baccharoides* was recently reported (Bhattacharyya et Goel, 1982) abounds in mineral deposits of gypsum, limestone and phosphorite.

Besides mining and quarrying the committant 'natural' (?) loose topsoil—contribute to the overall destruction of the natural habitat of *C. baccharoides*.

The plant is a chasmophyte adapted to a specialised and isolated habitat ; the almost vertical calcareous/limestone cliffs of the Siwalik and Garhwal Himalaya. The life-form of *Catamixis*—a sclerophyllous under-shrub—is a morphological adaptation warranted by the semi-arid conditions of these high altitude calcareous cliffs.

The ecology, including the climatic (average monsoon rainfall ca. 140 cm), edaphic and biotic factors support the

existence of this very interesting plant. Thus the survival of this extinction-prone endemic species in such an ecological zone rests critically balanced on certain biotic and edaphic parameters and any imbalance, whatsoever, could pose a grave threat to its very existence.

An intensive and thorough exploration should help locate this plant in some more pockets or niches. Population studies should be conducted for an indepth investigation of its biology/phenology. The plant flowers and sets fruit between the months of March and May. The flowers—whitish, pale yellow heads—remain in bloom for a very short period, not exceeding a fortnight.

Conservation measures to protect this botanically interesting plant are urgently called for. To start with, it is necessary to monitor or identify specific areas having sufficiently large, viable and self-sustaining populations of this species, so that steps can be taken at the proper level to keep such areas free from mining and quarrying operations.

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