

DR. G. THANIKAIMONI 1938-1986

The 5th September, 1986 witnessed a gruesome wanton killing of a number of innocent passengers at the Karachi Airport in a hijacked Pan Am Aircraft by an international terrorist group. It was probably the cruel destiny that led Dr G. Thanikaimoni to be on board that fateful aircraft, where he met a most tragic and premature end. Dr Thanikaimoni was going to attend the Second International Conference on Palaeo-Oceanography at Woodshole in the United States.

Born on 1st January, 1938, Thanikaimoni had his M.Sc. degree in Botany obtained from the University of Madras and subsequently joined the French Institute, Pondicherry in 1962. Prof. B.G.L. Swamy of the Presidency College, Madras was responsible to infuse plant morphological interest in young Thanikaimoni, which probably gave a permanent shape to his future research career. Dr Ph. Guinet later ushered him to Palynology, and Thanikaimoni soon became In-charge of the Palynology Laboratory of the French Institute, and thus a fruitful research career was initiated. He took up the palm family for a closer investigation, especially with regard to pollen morphology and systematics of the relevant family. The results of his work were embodied in the form of a thesis and submitted to the University of Montpellier, France, which gave him a Doctorate Degree awarded by that University. The thesis was later published by the French Institute. Thanikaimoni's main effort, however, was to combine ecology and pollen morphology to synthesize these two independent approaches. Beside palms, he also worked on the pollen morphology of tropical plant families like: Lentibulariaceae, Araceae, Eriocaulaceae, Menispermaceae, Potamogetonaceae, Sonneratiaceae, etc. considering their phytogeographic distribution and evolutionary sequence. Many young and talented scientists got training in the techniques of pollen morphology and pollen analysis (vegetational history) in the French Institute.

Although pollen morphology was his primary love, at a later stage he developed interest in classical pollen analysis confining himself into Quaternary and Tertiary palynology. In this context his investigations on some archaeological sites of Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand deserve mention. He also made significant contributions to the understanding of late-Quaternary vegetational history of the hills of South India and the mangroves of the coastal Tamil Nadu. I had the privilege of working with Dr Thanikaimoni on ultrastructural aspect of some problematic and rare pollen apertures and also on the mangroves of the Sunderbans.

Thanikaimoni's most significant contribution to the science of Palynology probably was the compilation of the Index of Pollen Bibliography in five volumes. These volumes are globally used by palynologists as international bibliography guide in respect of the pollen morphology of flowering plants. Of particular interest to him was the problem



of intricate palynological terminology. This problem was, and still is, in a rather confusing state. It was his urge to put the things into a more systematic order with a scientific and logical basis.

With this interest he became a member of the International Working Group of Palynological Terminology. As a member of this Working Group he wrote a few papers on the form and function of the pollen grains, the contents of which reflect originality of his ideas in the fossil and disputed terminological issues. He felt along with other members of the Committee to have a universally acceptable, uniform and scientifically based code of terminology.

An Indo-French Workshop on Tertiary Palynology was organised by Thanikaimoni in Pondicherry in April, 1983 jointly with Dr C. Caratini of the University of Bordeaux, France. This Workshop was attended by experts from various laboratories of India and abroad with the object to standardize the nomenclature and distribution of fossil pollen and also to discuss their uses in fossil fuel research.

His sincere efforts had endowed the French Institute a Sporotheka where permanent reference pollen slides of well over 20,000 extant taxa, many of which from extra-Indian territories, are preserved for comparative study. Thanks to his persistent efforts that the valuable collection of palynological literature of this Institute has become a source of ready reference and information. He published about 50 research papers and a few books, which have left testimony of his command over the subject.

Dr Thanikaimoni has left behind his wife, a son and a daughter, besides friends, fellow scientists and admirers in India and abroad those who profoundly mourn his premature death.

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