

PERSONAL NEWS

and ask very constructive and relevant questions to the presenters.

Speaking of my personal experiences with Kumar, he was a splendid mentor to me. Be it writing research proposals or any other scientific advice, Kumar was always there for me, and would enthusiastically share his expertise. I always admired the way he looked at the broader aspects of science considering all the minute details.

He has been an inspiration to not only me but to everyone who knew him and followed his work. He was a great human being, father figure, always down to earth, and never boasted about his achievements. He was a man of science who lived all his life for the progress of science and for the betterment of the global society. We profoundly remember Sushil Kumar, not only for his scientific achievements but also for

his valuable contributions to our community of geneticists.

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P. A. Sebastian (1956–2021)

P. A. Sebastian, the eminent Indian arachnologist, ecologist and conservationist, passed away due to heart failure on 13 January 2021. Indeed, he was one of the leading experts in India, who had sound knowledge on the taxonomy and biology of spiders.

Sebastian hailed from North Veliyanad, a remote village in Kuttanadu, famous for its green paddy fields in the Alappuzha district of Kerala, South India. He moved out of Kuttanadu at the age of 21 to pursue higher studies and his passion for nature. Getting what he called a ‘precocious start’, Sebastian became a college freshman at the age of 21, receiving a B.Sc. degree at 24, M.Sc. at 27 and Ph.D. at 33. After graduating from the University of Kerala in 1979, he moved to Belgium for a year to pursue a diploma in French. In 1983, he completed his M.Sc. in zoology from the University of Rajasthan. Then he moved to Bhavnagar University, Gujarat, for a Ph.D. under B. H. Patel. He graduated in 1989, studying the biology of some predaceous spiders on insect pests of major crops in north Gujarat. He was appointed Assistant Professor of Sacred Heart College, Thevara, Kochi in the Department of Zoology. In the same year, he married Elizabeth Chacko (currently Deputy Director, Department of Agriculture, Thiruvananthapuram). He became Director, Division of Arachnology (founder of this Division) in 2013, and served in that capacity until his demise. This is one of the leading centres in India where extensive research on spiders is on-going in a systematic and scientific manner, similar to the Zoological Survey of India.

The Division of Arachnology was established in 1998 and has since emerged as an acclaimed centre for research in taxonomy and bioecology of spiders. The

Arachnology Division of PG and Research Department of Zoology (DST FIST-sponsored), Thevara, has all the basic infrastructural facilities for successful implementation of any project on spiders. Identifying and cataloguing the spider diversity of South India, particularly Kerala, has been the primary motive of the Division since its inception. Sebastian’s efforts have led to



an impressive collection of spider specimens in the museum, which serves as a reference for spider enthusiasts across the country. The Division has developed modern facilities, multipronged strategies and technological capabilities to achieve its objectives related to identification, cataloguing, creating a repository of available spider fauna and database management.

Sebastian was a prolific scientist, publishing more than 100 articles in reputed journals, including two books and many book chapters over the course of his career. His early works include the influential book *Spiders of India*. This book was intended to popularize the study of spiders in

India, correct many false impressions about these insects, create awareness and interest about their study and, more importantly, to provide an in-depth understanding with detailed information on selected species. It was an authentic book on Indian spiders after a gap of 40 years from the Indian subcontinent. Sebastian has several seminar papers to his credit on the biology of spiders, endemism, species concepts, spider diversity of the Western Ghats, synanthropic spiders, spinneret morphology. His prodigious contributions have added 2 new genera and more than 50 new species of spiders to the world spider catalogue.

In addition to his role as a teacher, Director and Chairman or Councilor of numerous scientific societies, Sebastian served on several editorial boards and scientific panels, leaving a rich legacy in conservation education. He advised over 25 students both for doctoral studies and research projects, many of whom now have illustrious careers in arachnology and systematics around the world. Sebastian also delivered many scientific lectures on different aspects of spiders, including topics like ‘spider silk biotechnology and applications of spider venom’ in India and abroad. To share research findings with arachnologists the world over, as well as with the general public, the Division has launched a website – www.southindianspiders.org – the first of its kind in India.

Keenly aware of the threats regarding biodiversity, Sebastian was actively involved in initiatives to address the ‘taxonomic impediment’ by accelerating the pace of species discovery and description, including programmes such as workshops on spider taxonomy, spider identification and spider collection techniques. He received grants, both major and minor, for implementing automated methods of species

identification and description, and training the next generation of taxon specialists. Throughout his professional life, Sebastian collected spiders and undertook many arachnological field trips, both within the country and abroad. He assembled a large spider collection, which is now deposited in a reference collection housed at the Division of Arachnology in Sacred Heart College, Thevara. He had taken the initiative to form a research group solely devoted to research on spiders and related organisms in the Division.

In recognition of Sebastian's impressive contribution to spider taxonomy and especially ecology, one new species was named in his honour: *Plebs sebastiani*. This is a fitting way to remember his unique contribution to the world spider taxonomy as a pioneering arachnologist from South India. He was always open to new ideas and technologies. He had plans to start a YouTube channel to introduce the field of

arachnology and his research to the world. While he departed before this could materialize, his career remains a testament to his passion and commitment to the field.

His wife Elizabeth remembers him as a 'perfect family man, someone who can converse with elite academicians as well as the layman with the utmost respect and compassion'. His generous personality, keen intellect and indomitable can-do approach won him friends and admirers from across the globe.

Sebastian is survived by his wife, son and two daughters. His family members and well-wishers have initiated two awards honouring Sebastian's pioneering works in the field of research. The awards highlight the milestones he has achieved in the field of arachnology, and will serve as an inspiration for others in the years to come. The Young Scientists Award (Senior) will be given to the most outstanding biologist/scientist in Kerala. The Young Scientists

Award (Junior) will be given to the best outgoing postgraduate student of the faculty of sciences at Sacred Heart College, Thevara. For fellow arachnologists and the wider scientific community, he will always be remembered as a pioneer innovator who established a golden standard on how to approach, scrutinize and resolve scientific and administrative challenges, whether related to spider taxonomy, conservation science, or both.

He was the only leader of arachnology research in South India, and his death is a profound loss for the entire arachnological community.

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