

## OBITUARY



**B. S. Venkatachala**  
(1933 – 2007)

Dr. Bangalore Srinivasarao Venkatachala, popularly known among his palaeobotanist friends as “Chala”, passed away on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2007 in Dehradun. He retired from Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeobotany (BSIP), Lucknow in 1993. He was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1933 in Bangalore, a city known for literary and scientific activism. He had a distinguished career spanning almost four decades devoted to the science of Palaeobotany. He was well known for his wider interests on the past life ranging in age from Precambrian to Tertiary and made pioneering efforts towards development of palynology for oil exploration in our country.

Dr. Chala graduated from Bangalore University and secured distinction in his Graduate studies in Botany and Geology and Post Graduate studies in Botany. The proper blend of Geology and Botany influenced his career and put him firmly on the track of palaeobotany. Choosing a research career and to develop as an independent Palaeobotanist, he moved to Lucknow in 1954 and joined BSIP, then a newly established institute dedicated to fossil plants studies. Mrs Savitri Sahni, widow of Late Prof. Birbal Sahni, who was then President of the Institute reposed great faith in his scientific acumen and capabilities.

His early work in BSIP on palynology of the Carboniferous earned him a doctoral degree from the University of Lucknow in 1959. Most of his early research spread over Palaeozoic, Mesozoic and Tertiary palynology. His work on *Spongiophyton* and other Devonian land plant precursors and *Protosalvinia* has contributed to the understanding of precursors of land plants. He also evinced keen interest in the evolutionary history of pollen

and early distribution of angiosperms in the Indian subcontinent. His detailed study on Palaeocene-Eocene marker pollen from India and Tropical Africa shed significant light on the floral migration and extinction during this time was due to northward movement of Indian plate. He used botanical information for understanding geological processes.

As a United Nations Fellow (1961-62), Dr Venkatachala visited Petroleum Geology Research Laboratories in Rumania, Hungary, Canada and USA and served as a Research Associate in Oklahoma Geological Survey, Norman Oklahoma, USA. After attaining expertise in palaeopalynology and its use in correlation of rock strata, as a palynostratigrapher, he moved to Keshava Deva Malaviya Institute of Petroleum Exploration, ONGC, Dehradun in 1967 as a Senior Scientific Officer. He established the laboratory of Palynology and rose to the position of Chief palynologist and Head of the Palynology Laboratory in ONGC. He was instrumental in developing the palynological researches for hydrocarbon exploration in the country.

His love for Palaeobotany and the Institute of Palaeobotany brought him back to BSIP. He joined the institute as Director in 1985 but getting involved in the administrative work his commitment to the science of Palaeobotany never ceased. Under his stewardship the Institute brought out several important publications on Palaeobotany and became a hub of scientific activities.

During his long scientific career, Dr. Venkatachala published about 100 papers and supervised many palynological research projects in search of petroleum

source rocks. More recently, he has co-authored two volumes of Memoir, Geological Society of India on 'Palynology in Hydrocarbon Exploration- Indian scenario'. He has also edited 5 volumes of research publications in the fields of Palaeobotany and Palynology, besides Indian Gondwana, Memoir 21 of the Geological Society of India.

Dr Venkatachala travelled far and wide for the scientific and academic pursuits. His scientific contributions have earned him many honours and distinctions. He was awarded "Chandra Dutt Pant Medal" by the BSIP for his research thesis in 1959, and "L. Rama Rao Medal" for contribution to Indian Stratigraphy by the Geological Society of India in 1982. He has also been honoured with "Birbal Sahnı Medal" of the Indian Botanical Society in 1992, "Palaeobotanical Society International Medal" of Palaeobotanical Society of India in 1993, and "Commemorative Foundation Medal" of Botany Department, J. A. University, Szeged (Hungary) in 1997.

Dr Venkatachala was associated with many National committees and academic bodies in different capacities and he has been awarded with the fellowship of many scientific societies such as Fellows of National Academy of Sciences of India, Geological Society of India, Indian Botanical Society, Palaeobotanical Society of India, Palynological Society of India, etc. He was the President of the Palaeobotanical Society during 1987-1991, President of the Division on Stratigraphic Palynology during 4<sup>th</sup> IPC (1976-77), Vice-President International Federation of Palynological Societies during 1989-1992, Chairman, Expert Committee for Centre for Palaeoclimatic & Environmental Research during 1987-1990, and Chairman, Programme Advisory and Monitoring Committee of the Palaeoclimate & Palaeoenvironmental Research, DST during 1989-1992. He was Member of the Research Advisory Committee (during 1989-91) and Governing Body (during 1991-94) of Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology, Dehradun. He was also associated with Project Advisory Committee on Earth Sciences of DST during 1992-95.

Dr Chala continued to pursue his scientific activities after superannuating from BSIP. He was Emeritus Scientist

first at BSIP and later at the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology (WIHG) Dehradun and Adjunct Faculty of Greenwich University, Hilo, Hawaii. He was also a Member, Material Heritage Advisory Committee, INTACH, 1992 and Trustee, INTACH Indian Conservation Institute, New Delhi.

Recently, in November 2006, BSIP conferred him the coveted "Life Time Achievement Award" for his contributions to Palaeobotany.

He firmly believed in the dissemination of knowledge of Palaeobotany. An exemplary orator, he used to deliver lectures not only in colleges and universities but also on common fora all over the world where a common man could understand about the palaeobotanical research. Besides science, he had religious inclinations. He was a member of Ramakrishna Mission since his student days in Bangalore. During his stay at Lucknow and later in the life at Dehradun, he was a regular speaker at the congregations of Ramakrishna Mission. Dr Chala was an avid lover of gardening and had a beautiful collection of rare plants at his home.

I feel extremely privileged to have remained closely associated with Dr Venkatachala for the last three decades in furthering the cause of palynology in Fossil Fuel Exploration research.

He was a God fearing, hardworking and disciplined person who never compromised on his principles. His life style included regular yogic practices. Perhaps few know that he was a gifted singer also. We were fortunate to have heard him sing during Ganesh Pooja celebrations at his residence at Dehradun. Dr Chala devoted his life to the science. He is survived by his beloved wife Mrs Jaya Venkatachala, a distinguished embroidery painting specialist, two daughters Nivedita and Maitreyi and their husbands Vivek and Chandra Shekar respectively and grand children besides scores of friends and students.

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