

ROBERT WIGHT—IN THE HISTORY OF INDIAN TAXONOMY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOUTH INDIA

R. ANSARI

Botanical Survey of India, Coimbatore

Robert Wight (1796-1872) who arrived in India as an Assistant Surgeon of the East India Company in the year 1819 was attracted by the plants around him and started studying them during his leisure hours. He could make very little progress in the beginning due to lack of practical knowledge in scientific botany. At length he had the good fortune to possess Willdenow's *Species Plantarum*, Persoon's *Synopsis* and Lichfield Society's translation of Linnaeus' *Species Plantarum*. With these aids he proceeded further to investigate the botany of the Madras Presidency and began to collect plants with the help of native plant collectors. The results of subsequent years till 1826 which included materials collected from areas like Vellore, Madras, Samal Cottah, Rajahmundry, etc. were passed on to Sir William Hooker from whom he learned the art of lithography. In 1826 Wight became the Madras Government Botanist. He made an extensive tour to the Southern provinces and collected nearly two thousand species of plants. In the course of his journey, Wight reached Pulney hills of Tamil Nadu, where he found a vegetation quite new to him and made intensive collections. The post of Botanist was later abolished and in 1828, Wight was sent back as the Medical-in-charge of the regiment in Nagapatnam. While working there, he explored the flora of Thanjavur Dis-



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trict. In 1833 he made collections from Courtallam. Wight had also visited different areas in Kerala, during his regimental duties and made extensive collections. These collections formed the basis for the excellent work *Prodromus Florae Peninsulae Indiae Orientalis* (1834) which was written by Wight and G. A. Walker Arnott. 1365 species of plants collected

from various parts of the Peninsula were described in this book. Wight's association with Arnott made him a follower of the Natural System of Classification which in turn reached India and replaced the Sexual system of Linnaeus. Before his departure from India in 1855, he was at Coimbatore for several years and made collections from Anaimalai hills. During his thirty five years in India Wight has described nearly 3000 species of Indian plants and easily stands out as the greatest Plant Collector of his time. His collections in India also credited him as the author of about 38 genera.

Mention should be made with admiration of his *Icones Plantarum Indiae Orientalis* (1838-53) published in six volumes. In this monumental work Wight has illustrated 2101 Indian plants collected mostly from South India, with appropriate descriptions. He has explained in the preface the strain he took and the difficulties he faced to reproduce his figures at that period when the art of lithography was in its infancy in India. As Hooker and Thomson (1855) told, these volumes form one of the most important contributions, not only to Botany, but also to Natural Science as a whole. His other books containing drawings of plants are the *Illustrations of Indian Botany* published during 1840-50 for the natural orders of Indian plants described in his *Prodromus Florae Peninsulae Indiae Orientalis* and the *Spicilegium Neilgherrense*, a selection of 202 Nilgiri plants drawn and described during 1846-51.

Wight has also published some floras of certain mountainous regions in South India such as the *Observations on the flora of Courtallum* (1835-37), the *Statistical observations on the Varragherris of Palney mountains* (1837) etc. He had interest in other aspects of botany also. This resulted in many noteworthy publications, e.g. *Contributions of Indian botany-genus Impatiens*; *Directions for preserving plants and Practical remarks on the culture and preparation of Senna in the Madras territories*, (all in 1837). His publications, *On a new genus of Asclepiadaceae* (1838) and *Remarks on the fruit of the natural order Cucurbitaceae* (1840) are very informative. *The proposed new work on Indian botany*, appeared in the Madras Journal of Literature and Science in 1837, was a letter of Wight addressed to Robert Cole, the editor of the above journal. William Hooker's Journal of Botany published in 1841 included letters written by Wight from places like Madras, Bellary, Palamcottah, Quilon and Palney hills, to G. A. W. Arnott under the name "*Recent botanical letters of Dr. R. Wight*" in 1841.

Wight has immortalized himself by the valuable collections and publications including the various genera and species described by him.

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