



DR. RAJENDRA VARMA SITHOLEY
1913—1979

On 20th December, 1979 The Palaeobotanical Society lost one of its distinguished founder-members Dr. Rajendra Varma Sitholey. He had been associated with the Society from its very inception in 1939 in the form of a Committee of palaeobotanists working in India and till his last day was sought after for his valuable advice on matters related to its development.

Dr. Sitholey was born at Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, on 4th July, 1913. His father, Captain Rama Varma Sitholey of the British Indian Army fought on the Burma front during the Second World War, after which he retired and settled down in Dehra Dun. Dr. Sitholey's mother, Smt. Triveni Sitholey was a simple and highly religious lady who was greatly respected for her quiet accommodating nature. Along with his parents, another significant person in Dr. Sitholey's life was his uncle, Mr. Bhagwan Swaroop Sitholey, a bachelor who after retirement from Government service mostly at Simla, lived for about twenty-five years with his nephew. He was an upright man who devoted his lifetime to the pursuit of knowledge and had an excellent collection of books on diverse subjects from music to astronomy.

From his father Dr. Sitholey inherited his love for travel and from mother the unique quality of forbearance. His visits to his uncle at Simla developed his liking for the hills and his long association with the scholarly gentleman inspired his deep interest in reading and writing.

Young Sitholey spent his childhood at Gwalior and Agra and later moved to Jhelum from where he passed his High School. Unlike most children, he was not particular about having the gay and playful company of boys of his age. Even at that early stage he had what he himself termed as the wanderlust. He was quite content with being alone and wandering in open grounds and fields. Later in life, one of his favourite enjoyments was to walk alone in the hills around Simla and Dehra Dun.

After graduating from Agra in 1935, he joined M.Sc. in Botany at Lucknow as advised by his father who had heard about the famous Indian botanist, Birbal Sahni, being Professor at the University of Lucknow. This was the beginning of a contact which later developed

into close association between the revered teacher and a favourite disciple, that lasted until the sad passing away of Professor Sahni in 1949. Sitholey joined research as a scholar under Prof. Sahni in 1937 and after a year or so became his Research Assistant. In early 1940's he worked as the Senior Research Assistant in a scheme sponsored by the Burmah Oil Company under the guidance of Prof. Sahni. Then he was awarded a Senior Fellowship by the National Institute of Sciences at the termination of which he became a Lecturer in the Botany Department of the Lucknow University. In December, 1948 he joined the Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeobotany as a Reader and in early 1950 became an Assistant Director. In 1954 he shifted to the newly established National Botanic Gardens and became its Acting Director in 1971. He retired from that post in July, 1973.

From 1937 to 1954 Dr. Sitholey devoted himself to research in palaeobotany. His main contributions dealt with the Mesozoic plants collected from such widely distributed formations as the Rajmahal Hills of India, the Triassic and Jurassic of Salt Range, the Jurassic of Afghan-Turkistan and the Tabbowa Series of Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Besides, he also described fossil plants from some older rocks, of which his observations on the Vindhyan microfossils can be regarded as one of the pioneer contributions to the Pre-Cambrian palaeobiology of India. His two review publications on (i) The Mesozoic and Tertiary floras of India and (ii) the (fossil) Gymnosperms of India are a testimony to his excellent capacity of comprehending all the dispersed details of an extensive subject and bringing them out in the form of a balanced critique.

Dr. Sitholey's palaeobotanical contribution was affected first by his having to shoulder a lot of organisational responsibility in the initial stages of development of the Birbal Sahni Institute and later by his leaving this Institute for the National Botanic Gardens. There too he was mostly engaged in planning and organisation which are the most important aspects of a new institution. Still he managed to publish a few papers on some aspects of living plants in keeping with the general research programme of N. B. G. (presently named as National Botanical Research Institute). Amongst these, his contributions on the medicinal plant called "Gaozaban" and anatomical observations on giant stomata and the leaf cuticle in certain plants are specially noteworthy.

When in 1939 Professor B. Sahni formed a Committee of Indian palaeobotanists to coordinate their activities and to issue a periodical report entitled "Palaeobotany in India", he chose Dr. Sitholey as its Secretary. He acted in this capacity for all the eight numbers of this report issued from 1940 to 1953. In addition, he also edited the last two reports after Prof. Sahni. Again in 1946, when eight members of this Committee signed a Memorandum of Association to found the Palaeobotanical Society, he was one of these Founder-Members.

During his tenure at the Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeobotany, he made dedicated efforts in the organisation of the various aspects of its working, of which perhaps the most significant was the high standard and style of its journal, "The Palaeobotanist". He was one of the delegates who represented Birbal Sahni Institute in the International Botanical Congress held at Stockholm in 1950. From 1969 to 1972 he represented the Palaeobotanical Society on the Governing Body of the reorganised Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeobotany.

By temperament Dr. Sitholey was a perfect gentleman who would not harm or deride anybody. In return he was held in high regard by all who came in his contact. He was scrupulously honest and self respecting and would not compromise his principles at any cost. Although he never paraded his religion, he really believed in the existence of a Supreme Power at the helm in this world.

He was a man of many parts. Apart from being very widely read, he took more than a casual interest in several artistic pursuits. Oil painting, water colour, and photography were his favourite hobbies. He was well known for his clarity of expression and command over the language in writing. Although rather aloof by nature, he was pleasant company and his conversation displayed a very refined sense of humour. Above all, he was extremely fond of travelling and specially loved walking in the hills. But alas! Soon after his retirement he was struck by painful arthritis and asthma which rendered him immobile. Frustrated by this helplessness he developed a few more ailments which resulted in physical debility. Ultimately he left this world in the early hours of December 20, 1979 leaving behind his wife, five children and a large number of friends to remember him with affection and admiration.

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