

PORTRAIT OF A GENTLEMAN

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I first came in contact with Dr. R.K. Varshney when I received a politely worded letter asking for a contribution to the inaugural issue of a small quarterly newsletter, to be called Bionotes. I knew of Dr. Varshney from his publications on butterflies. He was forever trying to catalogue and straighten out the names of Indian butterflies.

Bionotes, he explained, was aimed at the student community, so that small findings could be published rapidly, usually within three months, so that they could be useful to the student. Normal journals at the time took anywhere from a year to five years to publish a paper, by which time the student had completed studies and moved on.

He shared with me the trouble he had trying to get registration as a periodical. He had no help, not even a computer. Working traditionally with hard copy and editor's pencil, he put out the journal regularly for the next 19 years.

It was his life work after retirement from the post of Additional Director at the Zoological Survey of India. All the irritations were left behind and he was doing what he liked to do and he did it well. The sort of things that irritated him was exemplified in an anecdote from his Zoological Survey of India days in Calcutta.

In those days, the most recent book on Indian butterflies was by M.A. Wynter-Blyth, published in 1957, but mostly following the nomenclature used by W.H. Evans in 1932. A book that still serves to identify lesser known Indian butterflies not covered in other works. Things had moved forward, but in scattered publications and we in India had little means of keeping abreast of developments in the matter. Dr. Varshney therefore published an

updated nomenclature for Wynter-Blyth's book, which incorporated valid updates and enabled those who possessed the book to pencil in the changes where appropriate.

It was not long before this caught the eye of others who were in a position to solve the problem and Dr. Varshney was approached to do an updated version of Wynter-Blyth's book, to be published by the Bombay Natural History Society. He agreed, but pointed out that, since he was a government employee, he needed permission to undertake the project. So he applied for permission of the Director of the Zoological Survey of India and in due course, it was granted. Now the fun started. He communicated by letter to the B.N.H.S. that the project could go forth and must have been in a high state of excitement, until he was called into the Director's office and told that, since the Director had taken the trouble to give permission, his name was to be included as a co-author.

Somewhat crestfallen, since he was an ethical man, Dr. Varshney agreed. Four days later, he was called into the Deputy Director's office. There were four of his seniors there, and all four told him to include their names too! That was the end for him. He threw up his hands in resignation and the book was never done, since the faineants themselves had neither the knowledge nor ability to write such a book. Thus, India was denied a decent book on butterflies for the next twenty years. I have tried to discover the names of these blots on the name of Indian science, who fed on public money like parasites and did no work in return. Subscription to Bionotes was kept low, starting at a hundred rupees in 1999 and reaching 150 rupees annually in 2019. This

obtained for the subscriber four issues of the journal a year, in a brown paper wrapping with handwritten address by Dr. Varshney.

In 2014, he approached me with the idea of putting out a catalogue of Indian butterflies, since almost 70 years after Independence, we did not know how many species of butterflies occurred in our country.

At the time, getting the expertise together was a marathon task, but finally, with the help of 12 international experts from Russia, Singapore, Denmark, France, Japan, Belgium, Britain, Czechia, Malaysia and Nepal, we managed to get a reasonably accurate figure of 1318 species of butterflies. More importantly, the catalogue stabilized the names of Indian butterflies. Besides national media, it made the BBC world news, a fact that made Dr Varshney rather proud. It is probably his crowning achievement, with almost 24,000 views on Researchgate, where it was the most downloaded Biology paper globally for a few weeks. Mrs Varshney and he graced a Butterfly Meet here in Bhimtal as Chief Guests in 2015. Although it was an informal gathering, he insisted on protocol and decided to have an ice-breaking session. Since there was no ice, literal or figurative, we gave him a hammer and duly introduced ourselves.

In 2019, I got a phone call from him in which he asked me to take over the publication of *Bionotes*. It seemed that the baggage of Impact Factors, Citation Indices and other rankings had proven too much for him and brought the journal to a point where no one was contributing anything to it. I was relatively unaware of the red-taping of journals in progress at the time, and said a hesitant “yes”, mainly to keep up his flagging spirits.

The first issue was a challenge, because there were three months to prepare and no contributions. Shristee Panthee, who naturally

filled the role of Assistant Editor thrust upon her, and I managed to get the March, 2019 issue out with only a few contributions from people to whom rankings did not matter. Then some kindly soul got us registered on the UGC list again and contributions began to flow in. However, most of the contributions are from people who are not formally trained in science. For many, this is the first scientific publication of their lives. Some have gone on to publish more of their findings not only in *Bionotes* but other journals as well, thus going beyond the vision of Dr Varshney when he founded this!

As editor, I have tried to keep the papers anecdotal and full of natural history, so that an average person can read and understand any of the notes published. I am grateful to the referees, who understand the goals of the journal and often stay up late at night to edit and debate changes to the paper under consideration. Shristee, despite her enormously busy schedule, stays up late to format the papers and make sense of the jumbles of manuscripts and photos she gets. Dr Ramamurthy, meanwhile, takes things forward and makes sure the issue is uploaded on the website of the Indian Entomological Society.

The current issue is the April to September issue instead of the July to September one. We are unable to put the June 2021 issue. I apologise for that. I had a rather debilitating attack of covid during the period and was unable to do anything. Dr. Varshney had also left us two months before, so he was not on hand to take things forward.

So this issue mourns the loss of a gentleman who lived life ethically at an unprincipled time, who never did the wrong thing if he could help it and who strove to improve society and make our country a better place to live in: indeed, a model for all of us!



Late. Dr. R.K. Varshney with Peter Smetacek, Bhimtal, June 2016