

Dr R.K. Arora: Obituary

(1932-2010)

Dr. Rajeshwar Kumar Arora, an eminent scientist in the field of plant genetic resources (PGR) and former Head of Exploration Division and Officiating Director, National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources (NBPGR) passed away on 3 March 2010. Dr. R.K. Arora made significant contributions in the field of germplasm collection, use and management of PGR and systematics, taxonomy, ecology, phytogeography and ethnobotany of crop plants, their wild relatives and underutilized species native to the Indian region. He was awarded the Dr. Harbhajan Singh Memorial Award in 1998 instituted by the Indian Society of Plant Genetic Resources, New Delhi for his contributions towards the collection and study of plant genetic resources of India over a period of four decades.



heteroclita, dual purpose grasses *Digitaria cruciata*, rice bean and wild *Vigna* from north-eastern region. He also participated in exploratory trips for collection of vetiver with desirable oil quality from Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh and the Chota Nagpur plateau and Western and Eastern Ghats for search and collection of progenitor wild species of native legumes such as green gram, black gram and pigeon pea. Dr. Arora also undertook collection missions in Africa and travelled widely in his capacity as expert in plant genetic resources to USSR, Indonesia, New Zealand, etc. He subsequently became the Officiating Director of NBPGR

(1987-88) before leaving he took a lead in coordinating PGR programmes for South Asian region and joined as Associate Coordinator (1989-1991)/ Coordinator (1992-1998) at the Regional Office for South Asia, New Delhi of the International Board of Plant Genetic Resources (IBPGR) later designated as the Bioversity International Sub-regional Office for South Asia, New Delhi (erstwhile IBPGR/ IPGRI). Here he was associated with promoting conservation and use and coordinating diverse activities and projects on of tropical fruit species in Asia. After retirement he continued to work as Honorary Fellow in the Bioversity International Office up to June 2009.

Dr. Arora was born in Kamalia, Lyallpur (presently Faisalabad in Pakistan) on 14 December 1932. He completed his graduation and post-graduation from Panjab University, Chandigarh and began his career as Assistant Ecologist (1960-1964) and Systematic Botanist (1964-1967) at the Botanical Survey of India, Calcutta after completing his Ph.D. in 1961 on the flora of Western Ghats. He joined the Indian Council of Agricultural Research as Senior Scientist in the Division of Plant Introduction, Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), New Delhi in 1968, where besides survey and collection of germplasm he was also involved in teaching systematic botany and economy botany (1968-76). Dr. Arora headed the Plant Exploration Division (1976-1982; 1986-1987) of the NBPGR (erstwhile Plant Introduction Division, IARI) and undertook over 30 exploration and collection trips to remote areas with high diversity viz. cold-tolerant wheat and barley land races from the Pangri Valley in Himachal Pradesh, fodder grasses and wild legumes from Zanskar and Kargil in Jammu and Kashmir, and *Coix lacryma-jobi*, *Moghania heterophylla*, *Hodgsonia*

Dr R.K. Arora was a prolific writer, and in addition to over 160 publications in national and international journals, he authored/ co-authored/ edited nearly twenty books on PGR of the Indian region among which are the Wild Edible Plants of India in 1978 (revision with emphasis on conservation and utilization in 1996), Wild Relatives of Crop Plants in India in 1984 and Genetic Resources of Less-known Cultivated Food Plants published in 1985. Dr. Arora was the founder Editor-in-Chief (1987-88) of the Indian Journal of Plant Genetic Resources (IJPGR) published by the Indian Society of Plant Genetic Resources (ISPGR), and also headed the team involved in the

publication of the Annual Report, Research Highlights, Newsletter and other institute publications of the NBPGR (1978-1985). Dr. Arora also instituted the best paper award under the aegis of ISPGR in December 2009.

His scientific contributions led to his election as Fellow of several scientific bodies such as the National Academy of Agricultural Sciences (NAAS), India, Indian Ethnobotanical Society and the Indian Botanical Society. He was also on the Board of Trustees of TAAS (Trust for Advancement of Agricultural Sciences), New Delhi. He was awarded with Dr. J. W. Harshberger Medal for 1996 instituted by the Society of Ethnobotany of India, Lucknow for his significant contributions in field of ethnobotany.

Dr. Arora, in spite of his vast experience and expertise in various spheres of activities relating to PGR, was an unassuming person. He was able to execute and complete a large number of assignments and academic works by literally 'burning the midnight oil'. When working on projects of a collaborative nature he contributed a 'lion's share'. He made his collaborators and co-workers aware of their strengths and qualities and provided a lesson and mutual benefits. His demise is a major loss to plant science in general, and PGR in particular, as he was undoubtedly a doyen in this field.

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