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Book Review: Common Tropical and Subtropical Sedges and Grasses-An Illustrated Account

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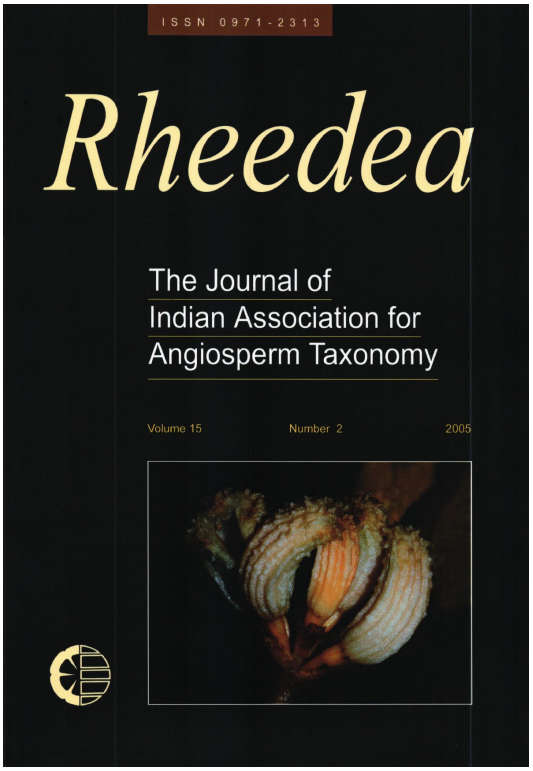

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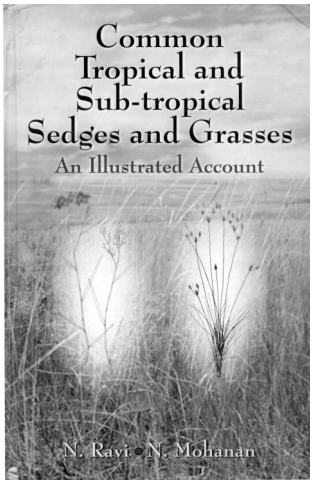
Book Review

N. Ravi and N. Mohanan 2002

Common Tropical and Subtropical Sedges and Grasses – An Illustrated Account
Oxford & IBH Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi. 11+219 pp., ISBN 81-204-1558-2. Price: Not indicated



Poaceae(Gramineae) are represented by c. 668 genera and 9500 species, and Cyperaceae by c. 98 genera and 4350 species in the world (Mabberley, The Plant-Book, 2nd Ed. 1998). In India, c. 261 genera and 1334 species of Poaceae, and c. 37 genera and 590 species of Cyperaceae have been recorded so far. Many of them are tropical and subtropical. However, the authors have chosen 44 sedges (15 genera) and 55 grasses (37 genera) to prepare this book with the objective to assist botanists to readily identify them. So, an appropriate title would have been *Some Common Tropical Sedges and Grasses.*

The salient features of this book are the description of Cyperaceae and Poaceae, provision of descriptive keys to genera and species, full bibliographic citations and basionyms of species, exhaustive descriptions, phenological data and notes on habitats, uses etc. Line drawings have been provided for each species. The work ends with references, glossary of *some* technical terms used in this book and an index.

Many of the species included in this work have been described and illustrated recently by authors like K. M. Matthew in his works such as *Illustrations on the Flora of the Tamilnadu Carnatic,* 1982; *The Flora of the Tamilnadu Carnatic*, 1983; *Further Illustrations on the Flora of the Tamilnadu Carnatic,* 1988; *Illustrations on the Flora of the Palni Hills, South India*, 1996 and K. Gopalakrishna Bhat and C. Nagendran in their work *Sedges and Grasses* (*Dakshina Kannada and Udupi Districts*), 2001. All the grasses included here have been described and illustrated by P. V. Sreekumar and V. J. Nair as late as in 1991.

The authors state that Indian books on sedges and grasses are very few; however, they have not mentioned them. All we find are references such as J. D. Hooker's *Flora of British India* (which has been cited twice in the references), Gamble's *Flora of the Presidency of Madras* and P. V. Sreekumar and V. J. Nair's *Flora of Kerala-Grasses.* It is unfortunate that no attempt has been made to introduce the students and beginners to such classics and past works like *A Handbook of Some South Indian Grasses* by K. Rangachari and C. Tadulinga Mudaliar (1921), *The Bombay Grasses* by E. Blatter and C. Mc Cann (1935) and *Grasses* by C. E. Hubbard (1968). Though old both in fashion and content, they are still relevant as they will make students understand grasses, their morphology, uses and identification. Nomenclature in these works is, no doubt, out dated, but N. L. Bor's *Grasses of Burma, Ceylon, India and Pakistan* (1960) will serve the need in this respect. Actually, there is everything in these old works that we need to know about grasses.

It is common knowledge that quite a few works on grasses of various regions of India have appeared, *especially after the publication of Bor's Grssses,* though Cyperaceae have not been that lucky. Prof. E. Govindarajalu has studied the anatomy and taxonomy of many Indian Cyperaceae but there is no mention about his contribution in this book. A. S. Rao and D. M. Varma have studied the Northeast Indian Cyperaceae (*Cyperaceae of Northeast India*, 1982).

Often, salient features or key characters have *not* been used both in generic as well as species keys in this work. They also suffer from minor errors such as use of quantitative characters. The species keys are elaborate. While an exhaustive description has been provided, it would have been enough if only salient features were used to prepare keys. Also, inclusion of the characters given in the keys make the description verbose and tiresome.

It is obvious that this book contains only the species of Cyperaceae and Poaceae that occur in South India. There was no need then to cite references like Dyer,

Fl. Trop. Africa; Forbes, *Fl. Trop. E. Africa*; Forbes and Hemsley, *Enum. Pl. China*; Merrill, *Enum. Philipp. Fl. Pl.*; Steenis, *Fl. Malesiana*; Dassanayake and Fosberg, *Rev. handb. fl. Ceylon*; Grisebach, *Fl. Brit. West Indian Isles*; Leone and Alain, *Fl. Cuba*; Townsend and Guest, *Fl. Iraq* and Trubov, *Pl. central Asia*. Citing these references and sprinkling extra-Indian generic names like *Apera, Coleanthus, Oreobolus* and *Uniola* in the introduction seem to be an attempt to give the book an *international* (!) look. The value of the book has in no way increased by citing these Floras haphazardly or conversely, the usefulness or otherwise of the book would not have been reduced if these Floras were not cited.

The changed names of some species have not been incorporated in this book-e.g., *Brachiaria distachya* (L.) Stapf=**Urochloa distachya** (L.) Nguyen**,** *Brachiaria ramosa* (L.) Stapf=**Urochloa ramosa** (L.) Nguyen, *Eragrostis tenella* (L.) P. Beauv. ex Roem. & Schult. = **Eragrostis amabilis** (L.) Nees, *Panicum maximum* Jacq. = **Urochloa maxima** (Jacq.) R. D. Webster, *Paspalidium flavidum* (Retz.) A. Camus = **Setaria flavida** (Retz.) Veldkamp, *Cyperus cephalotes* Vahl = **Anosporum cephalotes** (Vahl) Kurz, *Scirpus articulatus* L. = **Schoenoplectiella articulata** (L.) Lye, *Scirpus squarrosus* L. = **Lipocarpha squarrosa** (L.) Goetgh., *Scirpus supinus* L. = **Schoenoplectus supinus** (L.) Palla, *Scirpus confervoides* Poir. = **Eleocharis confervoides** (Poir.)T. Koyama, *Scirpus fluitans* L. = **Schoenoplectus fluitans** (L.)Palla.

The titles by the following authors, which have been mentioned in the body of the work (p. 94) are missing in the references: Palisot de Beauvois, 1812 (*not* Palisott de Bauvois as in p. 94), Robert Brown (1814), Kunth (1827), Hayek (1925), Hubbard (1934, 1948) and Pilger (1954).

The aim of this work was to help the beginners or students in identifying grasses and sedges – whether the noble aim has been achieved or not, only time will tell. So, only the correct names for the species could have been provided without any bibliographic citation as every nomenclatural detail is available in recent publications. Often the citations are taken from secondary sources and the faults, if any, in those sources have been perpetuated. Many mistakes and factual errors could have been avoided by not including the citations for genera, species and synonyms.

Students, for that matter many botanists, may not be collecting grasses or sedges certainly not for want of books on the subject. It many be that despite the availability of so may books on Indian grasses and some on sedges, they find it difficult to identify them because, the practice of dissecting the flowers – spikelets – and understanding them do not receive any attention in many educational institutions. So, if the beginners or students are the target groups, the emphasis should be on understanding the plants rather than giving them some name.

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