

In the early 1900s, BNHS saw the arrival of two stalwarts, the two botanists Fr. E. Blatter and Fr. H. Santapau, both based in St. Xavier's College. One of them, Revd Fr. E. Blatter, was instrumental in encouraging Sálím Ali to pursue a course in Zoology at St. Xavier's College, and thus obtain a college degree.



## Revd Fr. E. Blatter A Leading Taxonomist

Illustration of Indian Laburnum by Sr. Mary Chiona, from SOME BEAUTIFUL INDIAN TREES by E. Blatter and W.S. Millard



Revd Fr. Ethelbert Blatter was born in 1877 in Switzerland. He developed an interest in Zoology and Botany, which soon became his leading career choices. Even in his childhood, he studied the flora of his native hills and could name almost all plants by sight and taste, according to his obituary by Charles McCann [1934 Vol. 37(2): 466–469]. Over the years, he acquired a sound knowledge of Geology and Zoology as well, but realised that he could not do justice to three subjects at the same time, and so he decided to focus on Botany.

Soon after his arrival in India in 1903, he joined St. Xavier's College, Bombay, as a Professor of Biology, and the BNHS as a member in 1904. He began to contribute important scientific articles to the Society's *Journal*. His first article was 'The Fauna and Flora of our Metallic Money' [1906 Vol. 16(2): 334], a task that he undertook at the behest of a friend who asked him to "examine some specimens of our current coins with a special view to plague bacilli". To his friend's disappointment, Blatter did not find what he set out to look for, the plague-engendering organism, but he found several other flora and fauna, one of which was a "parasitic fungi and a mite called *Demodex folliculorum hominis*, which seems to choose the hair follicles and sebaceous glands of man as a favourite haunt"! Several others followed, a few examples being 'The Mangrove of the Bombay Presidency and its Biology' [1906 Vol. 16(4): 644–656], 'Ceylon Ferns in the Bombay Natural History Society's Herbarium' [1908 Vol. 18(3): 639–648], 'Revision of the flora of the Bombay Presidency' in 27 parts published from 1926 to 1935 and 'The palms of British India and Ceylon, indigenous and introduced' in 20 parts from 1910–1918. The latter was published as a book by the Oxford University Press in 1926. Another important series which he



The Blatter Herbarium at St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, since 1906, is the only herbarium in India that holds over 2,00,000 specimens collected from various parts of the country and more than 2,500 books on taxonomic literature on plants. Listed in the Index Herbariorum published from Kew – Royal Botanic Gardens, the Blatter Herbarium specializes in vascular plants of western India; algae, mosses, and fungi of Mumbai; seed samples of medicinally and economically important plants of Maharashtra, and wood samples of Maharashtra

wrote with W.S. Millard in the *JBNHS* 'Some Beautiful Indian Trees' was also published as a book by BNHS in 1937.

During his stay in India, Revd Blatter travelled intensively across the country, making collections that became the base for his writings. He was elected a member of the Executive Committee of the Society in 1916, and in 1919 was appointed Principal of St. Xavier's College. In 1926, he was elected Vice President of the Society, and was also on the Advisory Board, where his advice carried much weight. He was also a prominent member of the Bombay University's Senate.

Blatter returned to Europe in 1909 to complete his priestly studies. By this stage, he had gained a great deal of knowledge about Indian flora and fauna, which would help him in furthering his studies. He gained recognition as the greatest systematist in the field of Indian botany.

While in London, Blatter was a frequent visitor to Kew Herbarium, where he spent time compiling *THE FLORA OF ADEN*, which was published by the Botanical Survey of India. He made friends among the staff of Kew Herbarium, and they were to prove very helpful to him after his return to India. Before returning to India for the second time, he took time out to complete his *FLORA ARABICA*, which held a place of pride among reference books on Arabian plants until the late 20th century. Although his main contributions were in British India, his books on the flora of Aden (1914–1916) and Arabia (1919–1936) are also important contributions to botanical literature.

On his return to Bombay, he once again resumed as Professor of Biology, and built up an extensive botanical collection, of which

St. Xavier's College is now the proud possessor. This collection formed the seed of the Blatter Herbarium at St. Xavier's, one of the finest herbaria in Western India. Blatter retired in 1924, as his health started to fail. Yet, after retirement, he went to Panchgani as Parish Priest and this gave him ample opportunity to pursue his botanical studies.

In recognition of his 'Conspicuous important contributions to the knowledge of Asiatic Botany', Blatter was awarded the Johannes Bruehl Memorial Medal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal for the year 1931. The announcement was made at an Annual Meeting of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1932. He was the first to receive this medal.

Blatter died in 1934 at Poona. He left behind an enviable body of work and a tradition of excellence in the field of Indian Taxonomic Botany. ■

