

SIKKIM BLOSSOMS: STATE HOME TO 27% OF INDIA'S FLOWERING PLANTS

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Flower power: Rhododendron aeruginosum and Hypericum reptans in Sikkim. Special Arrangement

Sikkim, the smallest State with less than 1% of India's landmass, is home to 27% of all flowering plants found in the country, reveals a recent publication by the Botanical Survey of India (BSI). *Flora of Sikkim – A Pictorial Guide*, released earlier this week, lists 4,912 naturally occurring flowering plants in the tiny Himalayan State.

"The total number of naturally occurring flowering plants in the country is about 18,004 species, and with 4,912 species, the diversity of flowering plants in Sikkim, spread over an area of 7,096 sq. km is very unique," Rajib Gogoi, Scientist and Regional Head, BSI, Gangtok, and the lead author of the publication, said.

Dr. Gogoi said the publication provides details of 5,068 taxa (including 152 cultivated taxa) belonging to 1,491 genera and 209 angiosperm families which are naturally occurring flowering plants, along with geography, ecology, vegetation pattern and forest types of Sikkim.

The other authors of the publication include Norbu Sherpa, J.H. Franklin Benjamin, D.K. Agrawala, S.K. Rai and S.S. Dash. In the 582-page publication, the authors have included more than 2,000 photographs of about 1,350 plant species from the State.

Kanchenjunga biosphere

The State, which is a part of the Kanchenjunga biosphere landscape, has different altitudinal ecosystems, which provide opportunity for herbs and trees to grow and thrive.

"From subalpine vegetation to the temperate to the tropical, the State has different kinds of vegetation, and that is the reason for such a diversity of flora. The elevation also varies between 300 metres and 8,598 metres above mean sea level, the apex being the top of Mt. Kanchenjunga (8,586 metres)," Ashiho A. Mao, Director of BSI, said. Dr. Mao emphasised the need to have updated checklist of flora of every State, and active cooperation with the State government is needed in this regard.

Sikkim's Minister of Forest and Environment Karma Loday Bhutia, who was present at the launch of the publication, said that along with unique geographical features, the people of Sikkim have a unique bond with nature and trees. The Minister referred to the notification titled Sikkim Forest Tree (Amity & Reverence) Rules, 2017 which state that the, "State government shall allow any person to associate with trees standing on his or her private land or on any public land by entering into a Mith/Mit or Mitini relationship." The notification encouraged people to adopt a tree "as if it was his or her own child in which case the tree shall be called an adopted tree".

Mr. Bhutia, however, expressed concern that certain activities in the mountain State were being carried out without considering their impact on the environment and biodiversity. "The widening of roads to Nathu La, which is of strategic interest to us (bordering China), and the hydel power plants in north Sikkim, should also take into account the environmental concerns of locals. We are not against such activities, but it should not come at the cost of our biodiversity," the Minister

said.

Orchids galore

The publication details 532 species of wild orchids (which is more than 40% of all orchid species found in India), 36 species of rhododendron and 20 species of oak, and more than 30 species of high value medicinal plants, among other species.

Mr. Gogoi said that the founding fathers of botany were always interested in the flora of Sikkim. Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, one of the pioneers of modern botany, conducted the first survey of Sikkim in 1848 and published *Rhododendrons of Sikkim* . In 1898, two British botanists, Sir George King and Robert Pantling, published their monumental work, *The Orchids of Sikkim-Himalayas* .

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