

# In conversation with Dr. Sengottaiyan Vennila



*A torch bearer, holding everlasting credits in the field of Agricultural Entomology who believes in simplicity and creative hard work as ultimate sophistication. She has spoken to IE Associate Editor Dr. Bhagyashree about her journey in the field of Insects.*

In second volume of the Indian entomologist, we are featuring amazing woman working in the field of entomology for the past three decades: Dr. Sengottaiyan Vennila, Principal Scientist, ICAR-NCIPM (National Research Center for Integrated Pest Management). She is a pioneer in Integrated Pest Management, who is very grounded, simple, inspiring, and active. However, she is a cryptic worker who performs her duty without expecting any name or fame. With this zest too she won many individual awards viz., ICAR-Panjabrao Deshmukh Woman Agricultural Scientist Award-2007, Late Shri P. P. Singhal Ji Award-2015, Dr. D Bap Reddy Memorial Award-2018 for Biennium 2016-2018 and Late Dr. Sanjay Kushwaha Memorial Award-2018 in addition to part of prestigious organisation awards such as the National e-governance award in 2012 for ICT based solutions as well as the Prime Minister's award for Excellence in Public Administration during 2012-13 for Crop Pest Surveillance and Advisory Project (CROPSAP) of Maharashtra. Dr S. Vennila was born on October 14, 1964 in a small village Thoppapatty, Rasipuram Tehsil of Namakkal (erstwhile Salem) district, Tamil Nadu. Her father was a physical education

teacher and mother, a housewife and farm manager. Dr. Vennila completed her primary and high school education at Government schools. She enjoyed studying and playing *kho-kho* during her school days. She fondly remembers her stay under parental care and participation in farm activities till further education took her away from home town for pursuing two years of higher secondary education at Tiruchirappalli and B.Sc (Ag) cum M. Sc (Agricultural Entomology) for six years at Coimbatore. Although she secured admission at Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi in 1988 for Ph. D, her selection for M. Phil (Applied Biology) at the University of Cambridge, England made her travel abroad. She returned the very next year to pursue her Ph. D from the University of Agricultural Sciences, Bengaluru. Merit scholarship and fellowships at college level aided in lessening the financial burden on her parents. Studies were always an easy part of her life but for the stay away from parents and siblings most of life time.

Selection in Agricultural Research Service-1990 and its acceptance in 1992 following completion of Ph. D marked the beginning of professional career. While the initial

posting was at Biological Control Centre, Bengaluru (erstwhile regional station of ICAR- NCIPM, Faridabad), she got her transfer to ICAR- CICR (Central Institute for Cotton Research), Nagpur, Maharashtra in 1994 on account of common posting for couples, with her life partner an Agricultural Economist of ARS who served earlier at Trivandrum, presently working with ICAR headquarters. Dr Vennila was a cotton

projects of relevance to field problems of current importance with quality contributions benefitting farmers and the environment. Forging alliance with other disciplines of research of Central and State governmental organizations and with developmental agencies including industries with a well-knit policy for crop protection is need of the hour.

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entomologist for over 15 years working in the areas of insect ecology and Integrated Pest Management. She joined ICAR-NCIPM, New Delhi in 2009 upon direct selection and she gratefully remembers the inspiration and support tendered by Dr O. M. Bambawale, the Director at ICAR-NCIPM who provided foundation for information and communication based pest surveillance not only for field level pest management but also for research database development under National Innovations in Climate Resilient Agriculture. She has been keen to bring out the research outputs into mobile apps for easy dissemination and use by different stakeholders of plant protection. She considers herself as a “cryptic Indian Entomologist” despite handling many national level projects and representing India on transboundary plant pests at the G20 workshop held in Japan. She has near to 150 research publications and associated with many mobile apps (hosted on *Krishi portal* of ICAR & Google Play store - the latest one on FAW\_IPM). Her wish is to see more research entomologists take up

**Dr. Bhagyashree S N (BSN): Thank you for speaking to the Indian Entomologist magazine during these tough times amidst a pandemic. I am feeling privileged to feature you in Indian Entomologist “Women in Entomology” section. What made you to pursue career in Agriculture and how did you choose Agricultural Entomology?**

Dr Sengottaiyan Vennila (SV): Hailing from a farming family, even as child I had natural inclination for crops and animal husbandry. I have grown up amidst banana, cotton, cassava, castor, coconut, groundnut, rice and turmeric, mulberry, cattle, goater and poultry. I was also too familiar with all kinds of living creatures and non-living resources of a farming ecosystem. Although I liked all the major subjects of Agriculture, I was attracted to reading books like ‘The Insects: Structure and Function’ by R. F. Chapman and ‘Elements of Economic Entomology’ by Dr B. Vasanthraj David as an under graduate. Agricultural Entomology was hence the natural choice.

**BSN: How did you feel when you got first rank in ARS, which was quite uncommon during 90s for girls?**

SV: It was never the goal but I did feel a sense of achievement more for my parents than for myself. I realised that sincerity and hard work are linked to success irrespective of societal patterns.

**BSN: Role model/the person you admire/follow in your life as well as in profession life?**

SV: My mother for her clarity, patience and dignity and my father for the unhindered freedom of speech and actions he offered. Dr. PC Sundara Babu, my mentor during post-graduation who taught the course on Biological Control, guided my research during Masters and was instrumental in my studies at Cambridge is my role model.

**BSN: For women, usually career clock and biological clock go in opposite direction, how can we balance that?**

SV: Although easier said than done, making prioritised choices in one's life and making adjustments in accordance with circumstances as they emerge help a lot. As women juggle many responsibilities in a day, their efficiency and ability to balance career are higher. Balancing comes with practice of thoughts and actions in tandem with enthusiasm be it at work or home.

**BSN: What working women should possess to have balanced and healthy life?**

SV: Realistic aspirations and ambitions are keys for a simple and balanced life. Nurturing positive qualities of being a human boost mental as well physical health. Developing interests beyond academics help calm the mind and centre the self. Allotting

time for an activity of interest and passion amidst everyday routines is often refreshing. Practice inner peace- prosperity and dignity follow automatically.

**BSN: What are the biggest challenges or hurdles you've come across while working on ICTs?**

SV: I work in the areas of ecology and management of plant pests wherein ICT tools are integrated. I find more opportunities than the challenges of using ICT in plant protection for research, education and extension. A single national platform assimilating data and knowledge using ICT with convergence brought in from crop based organisations of ICAR, State Agricultural Universities and *Krishi Vigyan Kendras* having interface with DPPQ&S and NIPHM is essential for better execution of plant protection in the country.

**BSN: How would you like to see Information Communication Technology in future?**

SV: I am not an expert on the subject *per se*, so I can only speculate on the future of ICT. It is a tool that has tremendous potential and will have an impact on small scale production systems in agriculture. Shrinking family size and labour scarcity will enable a greater role for ICT in agriculture – buttons, knobs, keys, robotics, sensors, internet of things, machine learning, augmented reality, virtual reality etc., may revolutionize agricultural applications and operations. We need to develop rapid expertise with the developing technological advances of ICT to harness the benefits they can offer to agriculture, in general and plant protection, in particular. Suggestions for “ICT in Plant Protection” of the readers are welcome at: [S.Vennila@icar.gov.in](mailto:S.Vennila@icar.gov.in)

**BSN: Traits or attitude that can help women to be successful as scientist?**

SV: Ability for multi-tasking, adopting issue over personal oriented approaches in problem solving and balancing our personal and professional lives are the traits essential for all professionals alike irrespective of gender.

**BSN: A change you would like to see in young agricultural entomologists?**

SV: The ultimate goal of the young entomologists should be active and effective in contribution to science of the subject and more importantly farmers in the field. The attitude should be to share the resources, care for the fellow workers and to develop entrepreneurial skills for the youth of our country. As students and professionals, one should be aware of the fact that the principles and framework of theory and practice of plant protection remain more or less the same, however, the dynamic system variables over time and space need adaptive policies and management put in place. Dynamism and team work should flourish amongst agricultural entomologists so as to effectively co-evolve with insects and other natural and manmade resources. *“Ecologically Adapt and Evolve to the Needs!”*

**BSN: How did you feel when you got prestigious Women scientist award from ICAR very early in your career?**

SV: I was exceedingly grateful to the associated scientists, field and skilled workers of the Central Institute of Cotton Research, Nagpur and the cotton farmers of neighbouring villages who were pivotal to all my experimental findings and technological outputs. Since, I could work

during the eras of Non Bt and Bt cotton as well as Non IPM and IPM, my contributions to cotton entomology have been considerable and satisfying.

**BSN: No doubt you are a brilliant scientist with extreme intellect, why don't you think of administration?**

SV: Scientific excellence does not necessarily translate into good administrative skills. It is not an area that evinced interest in me at any point of time.

**BSN: Advice to young women of Entomology fraternity?**

SV: Nothing I would advice to women differently. My best wishes!

**BSN: Your suggestions/views and opinion on “Indian entomologist” magazine?**

SV: I am appreciative of the efforts and quality of the “Indian entomologist”. “Bug studio- Indian Entomologist Photo Contest” is a personal favorite. I wish to see the magazine reach a larger entomological community as the days goes by. An additional feature announcing “Forthcoming Events” would help the students, researchers and public tune in. I am thankful for the honour of being featured in the magazine. I would like to thank Dr. V.V. Ramamurthy and his editorial team for launching the online periodical that would promote entomological science and entomologists in India. Lastly, thank you Bhagyashree for the interview that made me reminisce my childhood, college, professional days and personalities I came across.

BSN: Thank you so much for sparing your valuable time to inspire us and polishing our minds by your kind words.

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Photo: Dr. Bhagyashree S. N. with Dr. S. Vennila during the interview.