The relevance of Mycology is global, as it touches every facet of man's life and progress on this planet. Mycology itself embraces the life and activity of a whole group of organisms, the fungi. The tropical fungus flora, still only partly and inadequately mapped, is yet extremely rich and diverse and has special relevance to us.

Vast tracts in the tropical belts and diverse habitats and substrates in them remain completely unexplored. The fungi are involved in various interactions with plants, animals and man ranging from saprophytism to parasitism and symbiosis. We know very little about these interactions as they occur in the tropical situation. What we do know is that these interactions may sometimes be harmful and sometimes beneficial. The study of the taxonomy, biology and distribution of tropical fungi and the application of the knowledge gained from such study for human welfare is the concern of tropical mycology.

Though the fungi cause damage to our food crops as plant pathogens and also cause biodeterioration of food and feed in storage and numerous other raw materials and products, they can be a source of valuable fungal biomass (e.g. edible mushrooms, food yeast) or contribute to soil fertility by their involvement in decomposition processes in nature or in beneficial mycorrhizal relationships with plants and trees. Many terrible and irksome tropical fungal infections of man and animals are known and yet fungi are also the source of antibiotics such as penicillin and griseofulvin widely used in medicine and many moulds are used in bioconversions such as those of steroids so useful in medicine. Apart from their great importance in fermentation, food, pharmaceutical and other industries, there are possibilities of using them in the biological control of insect pests, insect vectors of human disease, even against weeds, etc. Their potential for degrading toxic materials and recalcitrant substances will eventually be used to break down biocides and other unwanted materials so that they do not accumulate in our environment.

Indeed, tropical mycology impinges on every aspect of human health and development and to be able to harness fungal power for human welfare and needs, it is necessary to strengthen the base of mycology in the tropics. Our own strategy for development is dictated by the need to be self-reliant and not be dependent on others for this purpose. Teaching and research in mycology need to be strengthened so that we have young men and women suitably trained not only in taxonomy but also the biology of fungi which would include other aspects such as ecology, genetics, metabolism and biochemistry of fungi. Also, mycology courses should include primarily tropical species which have a special relevance to us. There is no organisation in South and South East Asia which can help anyone wanting help in the identification of fungi which are important in agriculture, forestry, medicine, public health and industry. Currently, we depend on the Commonwealth Mycological Institute in England and other Institutions abroad for most identifications. This is not satisfactory. We need a Reference and Identification Centre along with a Culture Collection. The Centre should additionally be responsible for research in the field of ethnomycology,
the subject which is concerned with the study of the use of fungi by ethnic groups in various parts of the world for various purposes.

The other important areas where research must be strengthened are the study of the etiology and control of tropical mycoses of man and animals; studies on fungal biomass for food and drugs and fungal products of various kinds; studies on fungal toxins, particularly their identification, monitoring and detoxification in food and feed; studies on biological control of insect pests and vectors, fungal pathogens and weeds; studies on the use of fungi in biodegradation of industrial effluents and wastes and biocides and other recalcitrant substances.

It is imperative that the mapping of fungus floras and research in ethnomycology also be taken up in a big way.

These ideas were endorsed by a group of mycologists from South and South East Asia who were invited to a Workshop on Progress in Applied Mycological Research in the Tropics, organized by the Botany Department, National University of Singapore during May 6–8, 1985. The workshop was sponsored by the UNESCO Asian Network for Biological Sciences (ANBS). The objectives of the workshop were:

(i) to promote mycological expertise in the region;
(ii) to discuss and review floristic studies and distribution of fungi in the tropics;
(iii) to promote development of identification and reference collection centres in the region; and
(iv) to discuss specific problems in applied mycology (both for research and teaching) which have special relevance to and of mutual interest to South and South East Asia.

An essential part of the deliberations was the presentation of Country Reports on the Status of Mycology. These Reports are being published in this issue of the Proceedings. They deal with the status of mycology in Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, Sri Lanka and India.

Taken together these papers give us a general picture of the status of mycology in South and South East Asia, despite the fact that not all countries which were invited could participate in the meeting. In fact, the incompleteness is perhaps a reflection of the rather poor development of mycology in many parts of the region. The workshop endorsed wholeheartedly the need to establish a Culture Collection and Identification Centre for Fungi or a network of such Centres to serve the needs, in particular, of South and South East Asia. Pending establishment of a Centre or Centres, the mycological expertise in the region needs to be pooled to advantage straightaway on a cooperative and collaborative basis for mutual benefit—such pooling of expertise would be a first step in the establishment of an effective network. The meeting also stressed the need to hold periodic workshops in different parts of South and South East Asia, and even elsewhere in the Tropics, with a view to stimulating work on the application of mycological knowledge for human welfare.

We are indebted to Professor A N Rao and his colleagues for the efforts they put in to organize the workshop and the UNESCO, especially Mrs Rudstrom, for support without which the workshop could not have been organized.

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