Soil Microbiology

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Soil is nature’s gift to mankind let us nurture it. The soil performs a variety of key functions: (i) provides food, fuel, and fiber needs of the world’s population, (ii) regulates the quality of the air and water, (iii) decomposes organic wastes, (iv) recycles nutrients, and (v) acts as a sink for pollutants (including global gases), etc. A soil usually containing more than 20 per cent of organic matter, or have more than half of the upper 80 cm as organic material. Also, if organic soil material of any thickness rests on rock or fragmental (rocky or gravelly) material, it is considered as organic soil. The organic residues of plants and animals (both macro and micro), decay with time and become an integral part of the soil. The main source of soil organic matter is the plant tissue. The animals consume the plants, excrete their waste products and contribute their own bodies after death. Thus they are subsidiary source of soil organic matter. The decomposed organic residues present in soil are called humus. It is amorphous and dark coloured fraction of soil organic matter which remains after the major portion of added residues have decomposed.

The soil is a complex environment colonized by an immense diversity of microorganisms. Soil microbiology focuses on the soil viruses, bacteria, actinomycetes, fungi, algae and protozoa, but it has traditionally also included investigations of the soil animals such as the nematodes, mites, and other microarthropods. These organisms, collectively referred to as the soil biota, function in a belowground ecosystem based on plant roots and litter as food sources. Modern soil microbiology represents an integration of microbiology with the concepts of soil science, chemistry, and ecology to understand the functions of microorganisms in the soil environment. The surface layers of soil contain the highest numbers and variety of microorganisms, because these layers receive the largest amounts of potential food sources from plants and animals. The soil biota form a belowground system based on the energy and nutrients that they receive from the decomposition of plant and animal tissues. The primary decomposers are the bacteria and fungi.

Microorganisms help soil development by slowly decomposing organic matter and forming weak acids that dissolve minerals faster than pure water. Some of the first plants to grow on weathering rocks are crust like lichens, which are a beneficial (symbiotic) combination of algae and fungi.

Soil microorganisms play key roles in the nitrogen cycle. The atmosphere is approximately 80% nitrogen gas (N₂), a form of nitrogen that is available to plants only when it is transformed to ammonia (NH₃) by either soil bacteria (N₂ fixation) or by humans (manufacture of fertilizers). Soil bacteria also mediate denitrification, which returns nitrogen to the atmosphere by transforming NO₃⁻ to N₂ or nitrous oxide (N₂O).
gas. Microorganisms are crucial to the cycling of sulfur, phosphorus, iron, and many micronutrient trace elements.


We hope that the information in this book would be valuable to all those concerned with the soil and its microbiology. We deeply value the efforts made by Dr. Updesh Purohit, Agrobios (India) to publish this book in time.

We express our gratitude to the researchers who have done tremendous job to develop the concepts of soil microbiology with new applications. Healthy criticisms for further improvement of the book are solicited.

Authors
# Contents

## 1 The Soil

- Historical ........................................................................................................................................ 2
- Soils .............................................................................................................................................. 3
- Parent Material .............................................................................................................................. 3
- Regolith ......................................................................................................................................... 4
- Composition of Soil ..................................................................................................................... 5
- Soil Separates (Mineral Matter) ................................................................................................. 5
- Soil Organic Matter ..................................................................................................................... 7
- Soil Formation ................................................................................................................................ 8
  - Materials for Soil Formation ................................................................................................. 9
  - Soil Forming Minerals ........................................................................................................... 9
  - Weathering of Rocks and Minerals ....................................................................................... 10
  - Soil Formation: Factors ....................................................................................................... 12
  - Changes during Soil Formation or Types of Soil Forming Processes .................................. 15
  - Soil Forming or Pedogenic Processes ............................................................................... 15
- The Soil Profile and its Layers .................................................................................................... 18
- Physical Properties of Soil ....................................................................................................... 19
  - Soil Texture ........................................................................................................................... 19
  - Soil Structure ........................................................................................................................ 21
  - Soil Density ............................................................................................................................ 23
  - Soil Porosity and Permeability ............................................................................................... 23
  - Soil Air ...................................................................................................................................... 24
  - Soil Temperature ..................................................................................................................... 24
  - Soil Colour .............................................................................................................................. 25
  - Soil Water .................................................................................................................................. 25
  - Other Soil Physical Properties ............................................................................................... 28
- Soil Colloids and Chemical Properties ....................................................................................... 29
  - Organic Colloids (Humus) ..................................................................................................... 29
- The Soil Reaction (pH) ............................................................................................................... 31
- Soil Classification and Soil Survey ............................................................................................ 31
  - Soil Survey ............................................................................................................................. 33

## 2 Soil Ecosystem and Soil Microbes

- The Soil Ecosystem .................................................................................................................... 35
Demerits of Five-kingdom System ................................................................. 71
The Six-Kingdom System ........................................................................... 72
Cavalier-Smith’s Eight-kingdom System .................................................. 72
Prochloron ............................................................................................... 73
Monstrous Microbe (Epulopiscium fishelsoni) .......................................... 73

4 Microbial Biodiversity: The Natural Biological Capital of the Earth ................................................................. 74
Factors Affecting Microbial Diversity .................................................... 75
Soil, Microbial Diversity, and Community Structure ............................... 75
Biodiversity at Different Levels ............................................................... 77
Ecosystem Diversity in India ................................................................... 78
Species Diversity ................................................................................... 78
Microbial Biodiversity and Environment ................................................ 78
Variations Found in Bacteria ................................................................. 79
Groups of Bacterial Diversity ............................................................... 79
Archaeal Diversity ................................................................................ 80
Biodiversity of Eukaryotic Microorganisms (Fungi, Algae and Protozoa) .. 81
Evolution, Adaptability and Biodiversity ................................................ 81
Bacterial Progenitor .............................................................................. 82
Microorganisms from Cell Organelle ..................................................... 82
Mitochondria are the Descended form of Bacteria? ............................... 83
Evolution of Mitochondria in Protozoa .................................................. 83
The Endosymbiotic Hypothesis ............................................................. 83
Cytoplasmic Membrane and Adaptability and Diversity ...................... 83
Radiation Resistant Bacteria ................................................................ 84

5 Growth Patterns and Interactions of Mixed Populations .................. 85
Neutralism ......................................................................................... 85
Competition ....................................................................................... 86
Mutualism ......................................................................................... 86
Synergism .......................................................................................... 88
Commensalism ................................................................................ 89
Ammensalism ................................................................................... 89
Parasitism and Predation ..................................................................... 91
Enrichment Culture ............................................................................ 92
Selective Media ................................................................................ 92
Media with the Minimal Requirements ............................................... 92
Media with Selective Inhibitors .......................................................... 92
Enrichment of Microbes in the Soil ..................................................... 93
Enrichment of Nitrogen-Fixing Microbes ............................................. 93
Enrichment of Clostridium ................................................................. 93
Enrichment of Some Other Chemoheterotrophs ................................ 93
Enrichment of Phototrophs ............................................................... 93
Winogradsky Column and Kobayashi-Okuda’s Model ...................... 94
Kobayashi-Okuda’s Model ................................................................. 95
11 Algae in Soil .................................................................158
  Introduction ........................................................................ 158
  Benefits of Soil Algae .................................................... 159
  Green Algae ...................................................................... 159
    Chlamydomonas mexicana ................................................ 160
  Blue Green Algae .............................................................. 160
    Nostoc .......................................................... 161
    Anabaena ............................................................. 162
    Tolypothrix ........................................................... 162
    Scytonema ......................................................... 163
  Soil Diatoms ..................................................................... 164

12 Fungi in Soil .................................................................166
  Distribution of Soil Fungi .................................................. 166
  Groups of Fungi ............................................................. 167
    Decomposers ............................................................. 167
    Mutualists ............................................................... 167
    Mycorrhizal fungi ....................................................... 167
    Pathogens ............................................................... 168
  Lifestyles of Soil Fungi ..................................................... 168
    Ruderals ............................................................... 168
  Common Genera of Soil Fungi ......................................... 171
  Benefits of Soil Fungi ..................................................... 173
    Fungal Associations ................................................... 176

13 Nematode in Soil ..........................................................177
  Distribution in soil .......................................................... 177
  Types of Nematodes ....................................................... 179
    Herbivores ............................................................. 179
    Bacterivores ........................................................... 179
    Fungivores .............................................................. 179
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