Art and Ayurveda Showcased in Book on Healing Plants of India
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Author Navin Patnaik Teams with Editor Jacqueline Kennedy

Lavina Melwani, New York

Did you know that a city with the Sanskrit name for ginger is mentioned in the Ramayana, indicating that in 2000bce this city was already the capital of the ginger trade? Did you know that although tamarind has been used in India from the most remote times against scurvy, it is also known for its effectiveness against mouth and throat infections? Did you know that the most famous tamarind tree in India stands over the tomb of the legendary Indian singer, Tansen, and 400 years later, India's finest classical singers still travel to his tomb to pluck leaves from this "date of India" to concoct throat gargles, in the hope that their voices will become as pure as Tansen's?

These are just a few of the gems extracted from Naveen Patnaik's The Garden of Life: An Introduction to the Healing Plants of India. Within the pages of this fascinating book lies a lush, overgrown garden studded with sacred banyan, flame of the forest, asoka, margosa and holy basil; lotus and jamun and arjun and henna; betel leaf and sandalwood and golden champa and many more. Each plant has amazing properties and equally intriguing stories connected to it. Patnaik has skillfully woven historical facts, Vedic hymns, ancient myths and tribal folklore about the ancient healing plants.

The Delhi-based Patnaik, who is a son of ex-Chief Minister of Orrisa, Biju Patnaik, and brother of writer Gita Mehta, is also the author of A Second Paradise: Indian Courtly Life 1590-1947 and A Desert Kingdom: The Rajputs of Bikaner. All his books take at least two years to evolve, with extensive travel across India and research into obscure archives. He says, "For me, that's been a tremendous joy.

India is like an unending well. It is an unfathomable well, with layers and layers of fascinating material which makes research so exciting. You can go into the past and find practical uses for it today."

It was recently reported in the Indian press that seven ayurvedic plants are being used by researchers to find a cure for AIDS, and this may well come to pass one day. Perhaps what makes this book particularly useful is that people are finally discovering that their links to nature are intimate and vital.

And that is what Naveen Patnaik has done in Garden of Life. Dividing the book into five sections on herbs-sacred, medicinal, culinary, cosmetic and aromatic-he traces the history of 70 plants and shows how valuable they are in today's world. Since a full two-thirds of ayurvedic medicines come from plants, they have fewer side-effects than western drugs.

An interesting aspect of this book is that it was edited by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, herself a great admirer of India. In fact, at the book party for The Garden of Life, when I asked her about her favorite memory of India, she smiled, "Just one memory? That's for boring countries." She believes that India has so much for the eyes and ears and senses, and this affection comes through in this book which is crafted and set like a jewel. Asked how it was to work with Mrs. Onassis, Patnaik compared her to an Edwardian editor in her dedication to details: "It was a great privilege, because Mrs. Onassis knows India well and is a person of great taste and refinement and high intelligence. She has an eye for art and a knowledge of India with an interest in science. And in this book science and art are intertwined." Patnaik has always had an interest in ayurveda, and this book took him across India meeting with ayurvedic doctors, visiting centers and researching the material. What gives the book it's jewel-like look is the collection of delicate miniature paintings of plants which Patnaik commissioned from artists across Bharat, many being the descendants of master painters. One of the artists, Bannu, is from the family of hereditary painters to the Maharajas of Jaipur.

In his book, Patnaik gives a behind-the-scene look at how the exquisite miniatures which grace its pages came into being: how the artists extract the colors from ancestral recipes using semi-precious stones such as lapis lazuli, turquoise and malachite, plants such as lime and indigo and mineral substances. Describing Bannu's tools, Patnaik writes, "His paintbrushes, like his colors, are also made according to his own specifications. One brush is even made from the single hair of

a squirrel's tail, a hair so fine it allows him to paint each detail of a man's beard."

Yet another artist, Ghanshyam Nimbark, also from Jaipur and in his early thirties, makes his paints from the flowers of the Flame-of-the-Forest tree, and in the painting of the indigo plant, he used colors extracted from an actual indigo plant. Two of the artists, K.K. Shreedhara and A. Ranjit, are from South India.

With its many facts, myths and histories, Naveen Patnaik's garden is certainly worth visiting: readers will come away with all sorts of fascinating information about the invaluable plants of India.

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