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The healing plants of India  
review of

John Parrotta, *Healing Plants of Peninsular India*.  
Oxford & New York: CABI Publishing, 2001.

(2004)

Since Said's *Orientalism* (1978), one of the primary interventions of postcolonial studies has involved an argument about knowledge: that western knowledge, particularly of other cultures, is not necessarily accurate or free from ideological bias. More recently, this has developed into a serious attempt to consider other forms of indigenous knowledge seriously within the sphere of authorised knowledge, namely 'the academy', the international university system which is heavily biased in its criteria and assumptions towards western values and perspectives ('Area Studies' would be a prime example of this). Setting aside the politico-cultural productions of the anti-colonial movement, two forms of unauthorised knowledge in particular have in recent years begun to receive serious attention within the academic corridors of power: in development studies, the emphasis on grand structural projects such as dam-building has moved towards a perception that any development should start from, rather than replace, local knowledges of local people, a position best known from the work of Vandana Shiva. In medicine, also, there has been increasing attention paid to various alternatives to western interventionist techniques. Within western medicine itself, the counter-discourse of homeopathy, first developed by Samuel Christian Hahnemann of Dresden in the late eighteenth

century, has grown increasingly popular since the 1970s. The same period has seen the institutional establishment in the west of other forms of ‘complementary medicine’, particularly Chinese acupuncture. Since the 1990s, traditional Indian forms of healing (Ayurveda, Siddha and Unani) have also been regarded with growing seriousness. John Parrotta’s monumental volume is a testimony to this, providing unparalleled information about the basis of Indian medicine in the healing qualities of local plants.

The book itself compiles information on 545 species of plants of central and southern India which are commonly used for healing in traditional medical practices. Beautifully illustrated with photographs taken by the author, its primary purpose is to enable accurate identification of plants used by healers in India who normally rely on the sometimes uncertain knowledge of plant gatherers to gather their plants for them. In order to facilitate this process further, and to enable standardisation for cross referencing of information, the book gives not only the ‘scientific’ name in Latin of each plant, but also the common names where available in Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Konkani, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telegu, and Urdu—as a result of which, the index alone is 150 pages long. For each entry, Parrotta gives one or more photographs, a verbal description, details of distribution and habitat, known medicinal properties and uses, as well as bibliographic references.

In a suggestive and all too brief introduction, Parrotta raises a number of important issues in relation to the fascinating material which the book delineates. This begins with the threat to biodiversity in India from deforestation, agriculture, and population expansion, and its implications for future drug discoveries. Other significant stories emerge as well: the history of medicine in India, which dates back several thousand years, and has direct links with the ancient Arab and Greek

forms of medicine that modern western medicine saw itself as superseding, gives a clear example of colonial power relations at the level of authorised knowledges: while the British were initially sympathetic to local medical knowledge, given that they had very little expertise in treating tropical diseases, with the growing ideology of cultural and racial superiority of imperialism this had developed by the early nineteenth century into a widespread contempt for Indian medicine even before there was any evidence that European methods could be any more successful. After 1835, all official support by the colonial government for local medical education and practice was withdrawn; by 1917, successive legislation had been enacted to make it illegal for any practitioner trained in western medicine to be associated with Indian medicine. Not by coincidence, this was the same period in which Gandhi and other nationalists had been promoting a revival of interest in the therapeutic qualities of Indian medicine and vegetarian diets.

By the last decades of the twentieth century, however, western attitudes had changed dramatically, with the increasing realisation that traditional local knowledges could be utilised as a means for locating new possibilities for drug development from plants rather than synthetic compounds. Given the very high cost of research and development, traditional beliefs regarding the properties of plants were regarded with a new seriousness by western drug companies (this is the only kind of research carried out by one current British bio-tech company). Parrotta writes that one corollary has been that western companies then proceeded to patent the healing qualities of Indian plants as their own discoveries: the two outstanding examples cited by Parrotta are the successful patenting in the USA and elsewhere of neem wax and oil as fungicides by Monsanto (a company best known for its high pressured promotion of GM foods around the world), and of turmeric root for the healing of wounds by the University of Mississippi.

Happily, since the book was published, the Indian government has successfully challenged several of the patents granted by the U.S. and European patent offices, including the University of Mississippi patent on turmeric, and some of the neem patents, as a result of which, these patents have been revoked. While Parrotta's volume will undoubtedly facilitate further research in this area by the big western drug companies, his patient elaboration and indexing of the individual effects of different plants should also make it harder for such companies to patent them as their own 'discovery' in the future. However, this is not simply yet another example of the exploitation of the natural resources of the South by the greedy North. Parrotta informs us that a vast amount of work in this area is being carried out in India itself: by more than 500 government and non-government organizations, 200 public and private training organisations, hundreds of botanical gardens and related facilities, in over 200 journals, an estimated 7500 Ayurvedic, Siddha and Unani pharmacies, and by 300 major commercial research enterprises. All this activity has far-reaching financial and therapeutic implications. Meanwhile, Parrotta's majestic volume represents a milestone in the slow process by which unauthorised indigenous knowledges are belatedly being given interested attention and serious recognition outside their own communities.

**Publication history**

Original publication: 'The Healing Plants of India', review of *Healing Plants of Peninsular India* by John Parrotta, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 6:1 (2004), 138-40

Web version published 2007

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**To cite this version:**

**MLA Style:** Robert J.C. Young, 'The Healing Plants of India' (2004). 1 June 2007 [access date]

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