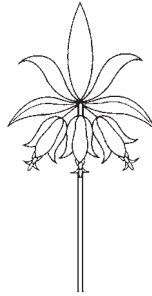


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An unknown botanical album in Kathmandu

Dominik Wujastyk

Abstract

A century ago a report was published in Calcutta describing the preparation in Kathmandu of hundreds of paintings of medical herbs. The subsequent fate of this album is unknown.

Almost one hundred years ago, a series of botanical paintings was prepared in Kathmandu, Nepal, with special attention being given to the names and identifications of medicinal plants according to traditional Indian medicine (*āyurveda*). The work was a collaborative effort between artist and physician and was prepared under the patronage of the Prime Minister of Nepal. Notice of this work appeared in the preface to a catalogue of Sanskrit palm-leaf manuscripts in the royal library of Kathmandu, prepared by the great Bengali scholar, Mahamahopādhyaya Hara Prasad Śāstrī. Śāstrī's description of the work is as follows (1915, pp. i–ii):

In the summer of 1907 I obtained permission from the government of Bengal to proceed to Nepal for the purpose of examining a new collection of manuscripts made by the Nepal Darbar...

At the library, we spent our time in examining the ancient palm-leaf manuscripts mainly, some of which were written in transitional Gupta, ancient Newari, ancient Bengali and other ancient characters. We spent our mornings in examining some ancient Bengali songs, with

Sanskrit commentaries, found in the library, and the evenings were spent in examining several hundreds of pictures of Indian Āyurvedic medicinal plants, prepared under the patronage of the late Prime Minister of Nepāl. The pictures were drawn and painted by men of the Citrakara [i.e., painter] caste under the direction of an expert Sanskrit and Āyurvedic scholar. The pictures related not only to the Himālayan plants but also to plants found in the plains of India. The Scholar and the Citrakara went together and drew those pictures under the very trees they painted. Sometimes their identification was doubtful, but in the majority of cases it was all right. It reflects great credit on the Nepal Darbar for undertaking this difficult task which, when published, will be very much appreciated by all interested in Indian botany, specially in Indian medicinal plants.

It is not known whether any or all of these pictures have survived, or in what condition any surviving pictures may be. There is no record known to the present author of their ever having been published. Recent anecdotal reports exist that there may be some plant paintings hanging on the wall somewhere in the National Archives in Kathmandu, but details are lacking. If this is the case, it seems at least likely that these paintings may be selected from the hundreds apparently prepared in 1915.

Bir Shamsher Jang Bahadur Rana was Prime Minister of Nepal 1885–1901, and it must have been he who sponsored the creation of these medico-botanical paintings, and not his successor Chandra Shamsher (PM 1901–1929), who was governing during Śāstrī's visits to Kathmandu.

A visitor to Kathmandu with an interest in the history of botanical painting might find it interesting to follow up Śāstrī's 1915 report.

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