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GLIMPSES OF INDIAN ETHNOBOTANY

Edited by
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Photograph on Jacket: *Ficus racemosa* L. was worshipped as a deity in ancient time (Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India).

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FOREWORD

During the last half century, ethnobotany has more and more been recognized as a valid discipline that can play a very material role in the advancement of many aspects of scientific, sociological and historical studies. An increasing number of investigators have been devoting attention to the vast store of knowledge of plant properties and uses still intact in native cultures in several parts of the world. And notwithstanding the rapid acculturation and consequent loss of plant lore in many areas, there remains much to be done before this abundance of knowledge shall be forever entombed with the cultures that gave it birth.

The Indian subcontinent represents without a doubt one of the greatest emporia of ethnobotanical wealth. Here, many living groups of peoples, still more or less isolated from the influences of the modern world, and who continue to live in close association and vital dependence on their ambient vegetation, provide scientists with unparalleled opportunities for profound research. But this vast region has other characteristics which make ethnobotanical research highly profitable from both the academic and practical points of view. It supports a most varied and rich flora—from the driest of deserts to tropical rain forests—and an extraordinary diversity of altitudes from sea level to the highest mountains in the world. And perhaps of even deeper significance, this region possesses in the vedas and a variety of other documents an ethnobotanical continuum that enables the contemporary investigator to delve into the distant past and often to link modern folk lore directly with that of ancient peoples and cultures. There are few areas that can offer such a unique combination of situations and circumstances. Consequently, there are few areas that can so auspiciously encourage ethnobotanical research.

The resurgence of interest and activity in ethnobotanical

studies amongst Indian scientists is heartening. The pre-occupation of Indian scientists and historians of many persuasions with the furtherance of original ethnobotanical research has not gone unnoticed in the world of science. The impetus which such research has acquired, thanks mainly to the foresight and dedication of Indian institutions and individuals, has served to stimulate similar investigations in distant regions. It has been vitally evident in India's scientific program and has had a direct effect on the rise of India's scientific resurgence which has been marked and constant, especially since the days of independence. The world of ethnobotany prays that it may continue in ever deepening intensity in the future—and there is every indication that it will so continue.

As an ethnobotanist whose activities have been centered primarily in tropical America, I am perhaps better able to appreciate the contributions being made in the Indian subcontinent than those investigators closer to the scene. For this reason, I am happy indeed to accept Dr. S.K. Jain's invitation to prepare this brief foreword to what promises to be a milestone in ethnobotanical literature. And it is particularly gratifying to me because it gives me an opportunity of greeting my Indian colleagues and of offering them my heartiest congratulations and wishes for an ever more brilliant future for ethnobotanical research in India.

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