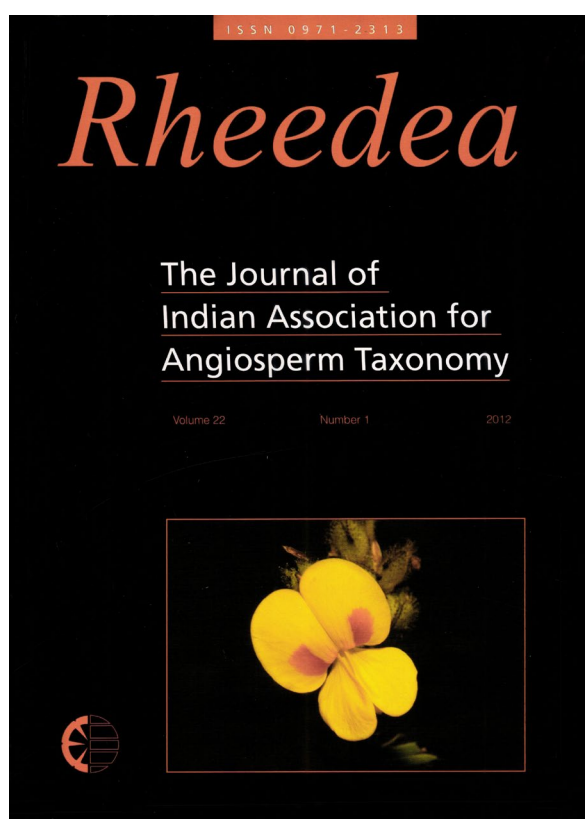




Book Review: Hortus Malabaricus and the Socio-Cultural Heritage of India

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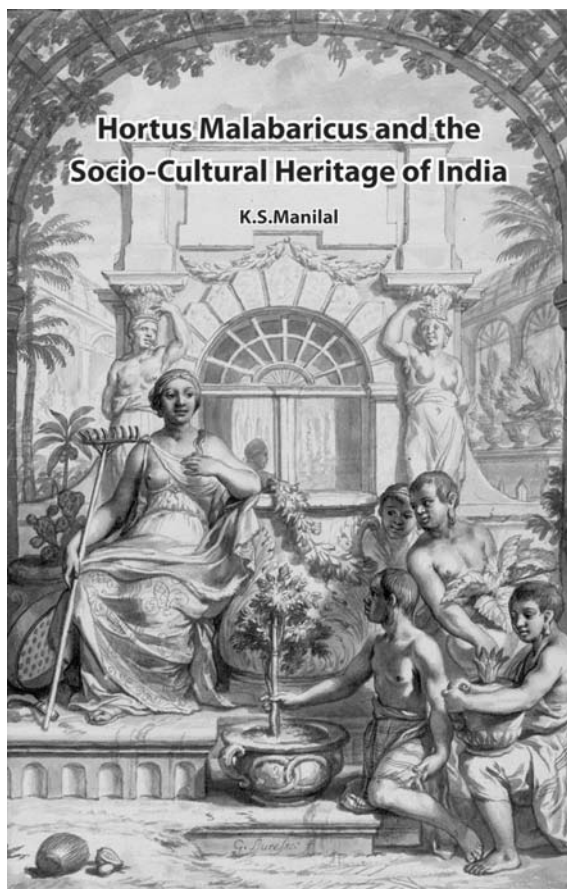
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Book Review

K.S. Manilal, 2012

Hortus Malabaricus and the Socio-Cultural Heritage of India by K.S. Manilal, 2012, published by Indian Association for Angiosperm Taxonomy, Calicut – 673 635, Kerala, pages 328 (Art paper), Hard bound ISBN No. 81-901637-3-6, Price ₹ 700/-.



This book is a valuable offering to the professional botanist and layman alike by Prof. K.S. Manilal, the taxonomist, eminent botanist and Emeritus Professor of Botany, University of Calicut. The book under review is a collection of various articles that he had written over a period of time. One assumes that this collection represents his work over the period of close to four decades that he has worked on *Hortus Malabaricus* and originals of which he chanced upon as a post-graduate student of botany while visiting the then Forest College in Dehra Dun, (originally the Imperial Forest College under

Colonial rule) which is now the prestigious Forest Research Institute under the Indian Council of Forest Research and Education.

In, Prof. Manilal's long and rich innings as a botanist and taxonomist, if one were to try and list his most significant and historic contribution, one of them definitely would be his translation and publication for the first time in English and Malayalam (by correcting the original script used for the names of the plants) and 325 years after it was first published, van Rhee's phenomenal work—*Hortus Malabaricus* (The Malabar Garden). I would even unhesitatingly say, that Manilal's contribution to make accessible in English van Rhee's mammoth 12-volume work, must be acknowledged as perhaps one of the rarest of the rare accomplishments in the world of cultural knowledge and natural sciences scholarship. van Rhee himself published his first volume in 1678 and the 12th volume was published in 1693, a good fifteen years from the first volume. One can imagine the labours of not only van Rhee but also of others, beginning with the key role played by Itty Achuden, the lower caste Ezhava physician from Kerala and a number of others including Konkani Brahmin physicians. It may not be out of place to also mention that in the march of Ayurveda as a knowledge system and in its (re)presentation, it has acquired the colour and image of being an upper caste, sanskritic based knowledge system without sufficiently recognizing the role played by people like van Rhee and the lower caste physicians, such as Itty Achuden and their community. Manilal's work under review also sets the record straight on this and the book has one entire chapter on the role of Itty Achuden in the compilation of *Hortus Malabaricus*.

van Rhee's own work is pre-Linnean and before the world of botany started adopting the classification system for plants developed by Carl Linnaeus. Linnaeus acknowledges the work of both van Rhee and that of the German Botanist, John

Jacob Dillenius. The equally famous contribution of Dillenius is *Hortus Elthamensis*, based on the plants collected in the garden at Eltham of the English botanist, James Sherard. Dillenius went on to become the first Sherardian Professor of Botany at the University of Oxford, where Linnaeus first met him. According to Prof. Manilal, "Among the old books he (Linnaeus) consulted, only two commanded his explicit faith and admiration". Prof. Manilal quotes Linnaeus who said, 'I have faith only in *Hortus Malabaricus* of van Rhee and *Hortus Elthamensis* of J.Dillenius"

There are several dimensions to understanding knowledge systems and equally importantly to respect and recognize the diversity of knowledge systems that ecological diversity produces. Natural sciences and taxonomy in particular especially from the world of plants and botany that evolved as a discipline around it, shows these links to ecological diversity, knowledge systems diversity and the evolution of linguistic diversity. In the context of India historically, *Hortus Malabaricus* of van Rhee in the first place and later the faithful work of translation by Manilal's and now this collection of essays by him, points to that richness as opposed to the reductionist botany and natural sciences, that is now taught and practiced by not only trained botanists but also ambitious environmental activists and so called nature conservation "NGO scientists". A new generation of ambition and careerism with little understanding of the diversity of knowledge systems and more importantly the politics of it, in the context of the knowledge, society and power interface. In an excellent review of Manilal's translated work of the 12-volume of *Hortus Malabaricus*, that was done by Prof. H.Y. Mohan Ram in *Current Science*, (November, 2005, Vol. 89, No. 10) Mohan Ram quite appropriately, opens his review of Manilal's epoch making translation work of van Rhee by saying, "At a time when botany is being pursued at a reductionist level, it is refreshing that an enlightened Indian taxonomist has presented to the scientific world the English edition of a precious work published in Amsterdam more than three centuries ago".

In the same review cited above, Mohan Ram writes, "The use of languages being considered crucial in the evolutionary history of human beings, naming and classifying became a crucial activity". I would add, that van Rhee's work represented, one identification, two the falling back on the prevalent knowledge on it and three very importantly verifying it through the diverse knowledge systems present around him at that time, thus showing an extraordinary sensitive to

cultural knowledge of the time and not seeing it through the blurred double vision of knowledge as power. This is why I also regard Prof. Manilal's work, both his translation of van Rhee and in this collection of his writings as an extraordinary contribution to the world of cultural knowledge and more importantly to that of building an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge systems in our ecological, social and cultural context. This book in particular, the collection of articles that Manilal wrote when he walked the lonely journey of translating should be considered a very important contribution to building that collaborative edifice of knowledge systems work. In the latter context it is interesting to note that the book being reviewed here interestingly is titled, '*Hortus Malabaricus and the Socio-Cultural Heritage of India*', with an equal emphasis on 'the socio-cultural heritage'. For people like me coming from dreary disciplines such as economics, works of Manilal produce a rare exhilaration when one reads it and enables us to see the great value of such work as we try in our feeble attempts to understand, nature, society, knowledge and power.

The book is well organized in terms of 15 chapters with several chapters devoted to the disciplinary links in terms of botany and taxonomy in *Hortus Malabaricus* as well as one chapter on 'The Indigenous medical knowledge of the early modern people of Malabar and their ancient culture'. The contents are special but the production of the book is not without its faults. It could have done with some good professional copy editing at least to take care of the (at times) repetitiveness of the book and some inappropriate English language usage. The Indian Association for Angiosperm Taxonomy, should consider an ordinary paper back student edition, which undergraduate students can afford with its present deficiencies removed and printed in ordinary paper not art paper as this hard cover collector's item edition is perhaps meant to be. More importantly, with the problems of "language" we have with students who are nowadays joining our undergraduate courses, where their weak language proficiency not only in English but also in their mother tongues, causing a kind of "double illiteracy", such books as Prof. Manilal would be good texts for teaching both 'language', meaning English but even more importantly, 'knowledge' and even more critically and crucially the 'attitude' to knowledge. All three critical to the development and progress of science.

Finally, especially when I refer to the 'attitude' to knowledge and which is a great casualty in Indian society, with its social hierarchies and knowledge

based on such hierarchies, I deem it very important to place on record how regretful it is that Prof. Manilal has not been accorded the larger recognition that is due to him from society as a whole. Though, in his own field he has been recognized by the following awards being conferred on him, notably the E. K. Janaki Ammal National Award for Taxonomy (2003) - Constituted by The Ministry of Environment and Forests and from his own discipline and peers, the Y. D. Tyagi Gold Medal (1998), by the Indian Association of Angiosperm Taxonomy (IAAT), and the Vishwambhar Puri Medal (1990) - by The Indian Botanical Society. Yet, it is highly deplorable that he has not hitherto properly acknowledged for his contributions to the larger field of culture, society and knowledge and history of knowledge.

While our country and society and our scientific establishment is yet to acknowledge his contribution, ironically the Dutch however have very generously made up for it. Journalists and newspaper articles and not professional societies I must emphasise, wrote about Prof. Manilal when the Government of Netherlands decided to honour him with the highest civilian order in April of this year (2012). I think the newspaper excerpts deserve to be quoted again and put on record in this scientific journal named after van Rheede and published by the Indian Association of Angiosperm Taxonomy.

“For Professor K.S. Manilal winning an award was the last thing in mind when he decided to translate Hortus Malabaricus, the monumental 17th century treatise on medico-botanical plant wealth of Kerala. But his effort has finally been recognized by the Government of Netherlands. As a tribute to his scholarship, Queen Beatrix of the Netherland

has nominated this emeritus professor of botany at University of Calicut for one of the highest Dutch civilian awards in April. In many ways, the Dutch was making up for the lack of regard shown by his country and home state to honour or appreciate Manilal’s lifework”.

“Conferring the ‘Officer of the Order of Orange-Nassau’ on him, Dutch Consul General Marijke van Drunen Littel said, ‘By honouring Manilal with the royal award, Her Majesty Queen Beatrix and people of my country wanted to show their appreciation to one person’s life-long dedication to public service through the study of Hortus Malabaricus’”.

“Manilal is the only person from Asia to receive the award instituted in 1815”.

It took Prof. Manilal 35 years to translate during which he learned Latin and almost spent his entire life saving on numerous foreign visits. But despite his outstanding contributions in reinventing the landmark book for the world, Manilal’s academic pursuit has been a thankless task at least on a personal level. It was not mere coincidence that he was not invited to the launch of the English translation held at the Rashtrapathi Bhavan on June 12, 2003”.

In paying our gratitude to a great scholar as we also recognize how petty our society is in matters of science and knowledge.

Lawrence Surendra
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