

BOOK REVIEW

Useful Plants of Manang District: A Contribution to the Ethnobotany of the Nepali-Himalaya. 1990. Perdita Pohle. VI + 65 pages. Franze Steiner Verlag Weisbaden GmbH, Stuttgart. Price: Not mentioned.

The book entitled *Useful Plants of Manang District: A Contribution to the Ethnobotany of the Nepal-Himalaya* by Perdita Pohle, one of the series of Nepal Research Centre Publications edited by A. Wezler, is an attempt to summarise the present ethnobotanical knowledge of the people of Manang District. Pohle's attempt is admirable because she has studied the people having closest ethnic, cultural, physical and linguistic affinities with the Tibetans.

The chapter on introduction, aims and methods highlights the general importance and significance of ethnobotanical studies. The objective of the study, in the author's own words are "to document the range of the local population's knowledge of native wild plants and the possibility of their exploitation (p. 2). Information on various uses of wild flora were based on interviews with traditional healers having Tibetan influence ("amjis"), priests ("Lamas"), Gurung shamans and villagers. Chapter 2 introduces the general features of the district, divided into three distinct ecological regions - Gyasumdo, Nyeshang and Nar. These are inhabited by four different and distinct ethnic groups: the Gurungs, Gyasumdopas, Manangies and Narpas. Their language and their economic activities, mostly a combination of the variable proportions of agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade, have been described. Chapter 3 deals with the orthography and folk etymology of plant names. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 form the body of the text and deal with the useful wild plants of ecologically as well as culturally distinct regions. For each region, the use of wild plants has been sub-divided according to type of use like medicinal, food and narcotic, ritual, and plants having other uses (such as fodder, fibre, fuel-wood, insect repellent, dye, tinder and building material). In

Chapter 7 the author summarises the uses of wild plants in the district according to region and category. The author remarks that although the local inhabitants have, since generations, developed a close relationship with their surrounding flora, many familiar folk uses of plants like preparation of paper, dye, and household objects to mention a few, have increasingly lost their credit on account of the advancing tide of acculturation and marginally on account of rise in their economic status. Chapter 8 includes a bibliography. Eight high contrast black and white plates add to readability of the book.

Perdita Pohle's present contribution appears to be a glimpse of Manang District and probably more successful as an anthropological contribution than as ethnobotanical. It would make a good reading for those who are seeking exposures to the lifestyle and practices of the Himalayan people. However, there are innumerable shortcomings when judged botanically, more particularly ethnobotanically. I am, therefore, inclined to be extremely critical of this labourously documented and handsomely bound monograph.

Inconsistency begins when the reviewer counts only 135 entities of plants identified to species level in the author's list of 192 entities. Twenty-five entities have been identified to genera, five to family, sixteen to vernacular names alone and surprisingly, no trouble has been taken to identify seven specimens of fungi and four specimens of lichens. Let the reader beware that the National Herbarium of Nepal is in capacity to identify high altitude flora of Nepal, however, the author does not give any reason why only 135 of the 192 listed plants were identified at the National Herbarium of Nepal.

The value of the data from any field work lies with the material, with which the data are tied, and which are deposited in a recognised institution, for posteriority and future reference. As there are several unidentified angiosperms, fungi and lichens, and also there are no voucher herbarium specimens, Pohle's information dealing with those unidentified plants and their usages are in doubt. At the same time, identification of plants is not a gambler's guess. Pohle's claims to identify plant without seeing it and determining morphology based on informant's memory are "sure shot" glitches. For example, Pohle identified "lugtsidobo" as *Saussurea* sp. (p. 36) without even seeing a specimen.

The author lists the identified plants by the recent Latin binomial except for few instances like *Anaphalis* *Cuneifolia* (DC.) Hook. f.,

Artemisia vulgaris Linn., *Cynanchum vincetoxicum* (L.) Pers., *Gentiana stylophera* C.B. Clarke, *Nardostachys jatamansi* DC., and *Polygonum macrophyllum* D. Don. To include *Dicranostigma lactuoides* Hook. f. & Thoms. under the family Nymphaeaceae, however, cannot be taken as mere typographic error.

Although ethnobotanical study involves plant-uses in general, medicinal use is important. No ethnomedical study is complete without detailed recording of dosage and administration. It is urgent, therefore, to pay due attention on how the plant or plant product is utilized, what is the dosage form, and the route of administration. Surprisingly, the author does not bother about getting such eminent ethnomedical enquiries in majority of the cases, leaving readers to the wild guess. In continuation, the following are a few of the numerous evidences of absolutely incomplete information provided by the author: "Gyamsal" has been introduced as an Indian medicine with no further detail (p. 14). *Cuscuta santapau* Banerji & Das has been said to be used against ulcers when used in combination with approximately 10 other medicinal plants (p. 15). The root of *Flemingia procumbens* Roxb. has been said to find its use as a panacea when mixed with other herbs (p. 16). The aerial parts of *Halenia elliptica* D. Don, when mixed with other medicinal herbs is said to make an esteemed panacea (p. 17). The aerial parts of *Gentiana stylophera* C.B. Clarke are components of a panacea (p. 24). The fruits of *Anemone rivularis* Buch.-Ham. ex DC. have curative properties (p. 24). Plants like *Anemone vitifolia* Buch.-Ham. ex DC. (p. 24), *Aster* sp. (P. 24) and *Swertia ciliata* (D. Don ex G. Don) B.L. Burt (p. 35) have been said to be used medicine but every further indication has been avoided. If a person mixes Yertsagumbu with 13 other herbs and takes the mixture over a period of 3 years, he will become as thick as an elephant, quick as a horse and pretty as a peacock (p. 37). A decoction effective in treating tuberculosis is made from the root of *Clematis montana* Buch.-Ham. in combination with other herbs (p. 38). At the same time, all uses reported in this book are the results of the author's interviews. Therefore, all statements on medicinal use are not pharmacological and clinically affirmative. Thus, it has to be stated "as claimed" or "alleged used for", and the likes.

More does not necessarily mean better. A significant number of the 50 references bear no relevance to the ethnobotany of Manang District. A review of scientific information available on botanical, chemical, pharmacological and clinical aspects on at least some of the medicinal plants listed which are well known (notably *Acorus calamus* L., *Artemisia dubia* Wall. Ex Besser, *Berberis aristata* DC., *Bergenia ciliata* (Haw.). Sternb.,

Cannabis sativa L., *Dactylorhiza hatagirea* (D. Don) Soo, *Nardostachys grandiflora* DC., *Paris polyphylla* Smith, *Picrorhiza scrophulariiflora* Pennell, *Plantago major* L., *Prinsepia uittlis* Royle, *Rheum australe* D. Don, *Rumex nepalensis* Spreng., *Selinum tenuifolium* Wall. ex C. B. Clarke, *Thymus serpyllum* L., *Valeriana jatamansi* Jones, and *Zanthoxylum armatum* D C to mention a few) would have also served as a more useful exercise. On the other hand, it would have been more meaningful for the author to have compared the medicinal properties and therapeutic claims of plants in Manang District with those of other regions and emphasize significant information, if any, specific to the study area.

Although the author does not make any claim to completeness (p. 43), she does not recommend the important role of basic research on present findings. Certainly there is need for all levels and kinds of research from purely scientific to economic. Therefore, it is my personal view that while Pohle's information may be useful in documenting the ethnic practices, data presented in this book do not particularly add comprehensively to our scientific knowledge.

Finally, I do not wish to suggest that everything in this monograph is irrelevant or wrong. The unevenness of the work in this monograph means simply that it must be read carefully and selectively, with constant vigilance to spot the author's frequent tendency to provide incomplete and rather confusing information, if it is to be used as a manual.

– Nirmal Kumar Bhattarai

BOOK REVIEW

Shrestha, B.P. 1990. *Nepalese Economy in Retrospect and Prospect*. Kathmandu: Himalayan Booksellers. 138 pages. Price: Not mentioned.

In an attempt to identify various policy choices and national and international resources potentially contributive to economic development in Nepal, the author has followed a blandly descriptive approach. The book totally ignores the experiences of the least developed but land-locked nations whose problems uniquely represent the basic constraints Nepal faces. Divided into four chapters, the book is repetitive. It is also biased towards the maintenance of the top-down schemes of property entitlement, resource occupation and economic management which have plagued the national economy of Nepal for the last 30 years.

Th first chapter of the book superficially reviews the Nepali economic history of development. The second chapter covers the basic development challenges Nepal faces. Chapter 3 links the Nepali economic scene to a model very similar to that of Arthur Lewis, i.e. economic development within a setting of unlimited supply of labour. In Chapter 4 under the heading of "*Economic System and Management*," there is much conceptual confusion over the notion a cooperative sector.

Inspite of useful overviews on problems of population, growth and development, the author states the obvious when he notes that "the structure of economy remained virtually intact during the past three decades" (p. 9). The solution, then, must lie not merely in economic tinkering but in a structural shift from an autocratic to democratic polity and economy. Shrestha is correct when he says, "If expansion of overseas trade in the name of trade diversification and export expansion also becomes more lucrative than locking up money in uncertain home industries, ... a substantial part of such trade becomes oriented to cater to the needs of the newly emerging

affluent class in urban areas" (p. 38).

Other critical issues that are broadly discussed in this book cover basic needs, resource mobilization, employment, population, environment and public enterprises. Shrestha, however, is unwarrantedly narrow in dealing with these issues. Illustratively, unless there is an equality of opportunity in general equal access to basic social goods in particular, the objective of the fulfillment of basic needs cannot be attained. Resource mobilization, as also the fulfillment of basic needs necessitates reliance to be placed on direct taxes, as such taxes are directly tied with levels of income and wealth. These properties are rarely found in indirect taxes whose incidence largely rests on the poor.

Public enterprises, in Shrestha's view, "have been draining away more resources from the public treasury than they have been contributing to it" (p. 114). He concludes from this, "the government seems to be inclined to weed out some dead logs and transfer wholly or partially some of the public enterprises to the private sector. It is the right step in right direction and should, thus, be pursued earnestly as far and as fast as practicable" (p. 115). What Shrestha forgets in this connection is that public enterprises are not erected for reaping direct monetary gains. Such enterprises must not be evaluated only in terms of the balance in the profit-and-loss account. Instead, one must keep in mind that these enterprises have definite objectives of supplying goods and services for public benefit at subsidised prices and of providing employment opportunities. These help realize the goals of the basic needs plan. One needs to pursue a balance in the trade off between efficiency and equity while promoting public enterprises.

One important but missing explanation in this book is related to monetary and financial forces with their forward and backward linkages. These forces have a lot to do with resource mobilization and development by creating demand and supply influences on production exchange and distribution. A Basic Needs Approach to a plan must stick to the principle that growth with equity requires a neutral increase in money supply.

In a nutshell, the book will be of interest only for those who prefer a descriptive and quasi-historical approach to the economy of Nepal.

– Gunanidhi Sharma