Histories of Central Himalayan Herbs: *Vanaspati Karyalaya* in Tehri Princely State c. 1879–1950

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Summary

This short essay describes how the advent of scientific forestry in the princely state of Tehri-Garhwal in the Indian Himalayas, together with the growth of an urban elite Hindu market for Ayurvedic potions, initiated the transformation of the trade in Himalayan herbs in the early twentieth century. The Tehri Durbar's attempt to alienate high-altitude meadows (*bugyals*) for the cultivation of Ayurvedic herbs suggests how associations between the Himalayas and healing herbs were becoming increasingly fetishized. This fetishization not only risked destroying delicate meadow ecosystems but further elided local knowledges about medicinal plants, instead privileging an elite Hindu approach to Ayurveda.

In the district of Garhwal in the Indian Himalayas, at 10,000 feet (3,048 meters) above sea level, forests of sycamore, chestnut, and rhododendron gradually give way to gently sloping grasslands. Known locally as *bugyals* (from the Garhwali word *bug* for soft grasses), these meadows were the favored grazing grounds of communities of trans-Himalayan traders and their flocks of sheep and goats. High-altitude meadows are home to musk deer, *moonal* pheasants, and a variety of flowers, grasses (such as the scented *jambu*), medicinal herbs, and roots (*jadi butiyan*). Garhwali villagers had long used the *jadi butiyan* of *bugyals* for household consumption and trade. Customary restrictions—such as the belief that flowers having medicinal properties, like the Brahma Kamal, should not be plucked before the Nanda Devi fair—made this usage sustainable. The advent of scientific forestry in the princely state of Tehri-Garhwal (the Tehri Durbar), together with the growth of an urban elite Hindu market for Ayurvedic potions, arguably transformed the social lives of Himalayan herbs.

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The Gurson Bugyal and the *chappars* (summer shelters) of seasonal Garhwali shepherds.

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Historians have argued that modern associations between Ayurveda and "Hinduism" constitute an "invented tradition." Works by upper-caste elites, such as the Maharaja of Gondal's *Aryan Medical Science* (1895), claimed an exclusively "Hindu" provenance for the medicinal practices of Ayurveda. The nationalist reinvention of modern Ayurveda generated a market for medicinal herbs dominated by over a dozen firms by 1910. This emergent urban, "Hindu" bourgeois market for herbal medicines provides the context for the Tehri Durbar's arguably unique project to commodify Himalayan herbs. Whereas the British government was reluctant to expand the plantation and manufacture of indigenous drugs, the Durbar established a separate department for the purpose, called the Vanaspati Karyalaya, that worked closely with the Forest Department.

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Auli Medicinal Herb Plantation, managed by the Uttarakhand Forest Department, on the fringes of Gurson Bugyal in Eastern Garhwal. Photograph by Nivedita Nath

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Subordinated to the British government, the Tehri Durbar had begun contracting out vast swathes of pine and *deodar* forests to timber traders from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. In 1879 the Durbar's Forest Department demarcated protected Reserved Forests and restricted peasant access to common resources. Restrictions on the sale and collection of forest produce were put in place between 1878 and 1885, under the reign of Pratap Shah, precipitating numerous forest *dhandaks* (uprisings) as a consequence. Rules governing forest access changed in response to such protests and by 1930 prohibitions on the collection of and trade in medicinal herbs were lifted in certain areas. The foundation of the Vanaspati Karyalaya prompted the systematization of the Forest Department's initial efforts to monetize the collection of herbs through taxes, contracts, and tenders. By 1927 the department was working with the Karyalaya to carry out the sale of medicinal herbs, such as Gugal, Mashi, Atis, and Kawri, yielding an income of 18,294 rupees. Nevertheless, a quantity of collected herbs remained undisposed of. From the Durbar's *Annual Reports*, it appears that though herbs were in demand in domestic and foreign markets, the Karyalaya's preparation of Ayurvedic medicines seemed to have commanded "ready sale" primarily in the domestic market. Subsequently, therefore, the Forest Department focused on the overall sale and plantation of herbs while the Karyalaya specialized in the processing of herbs.

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Outline of older terraces used for the cultivation of medicinal herbs by the Forest Department, with a Kumauni iris (one among an array of meadow flowers) in the foreground.

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Anticipating an extension of markets "as demand for Himalayan medicines grows," the Durbar charted a project of mass plantation to overcome the "expense and difficulty of searching for herbs of indigenous growth" that were "scattered among other herb plants and weeds." The *bugyals* of Garhwal were thus classified as "wastelands" from which "practically no income at present can be derived." This justified plans for the cultivation of aconites such as *kut* and *atis* on a projected area of 2,000 square miles (517,997 hectares) of alpine grassland. In the 1930s, the Durbar initiated the plantation of *kut* in the Ganga Bhillangana Forest Division, employing trained gardeners as well as "coolie" labor to transplant herbs from nurseries to enclosed meadows. Thus, *bugyals* hitherto controlled by villagers and their livestock were gradually being enclosed for herb plantations.

The Karyalaya also opened a pharmaceutical works just outside the town of Rishikesh at Muni ki Reti to manufacture Ayurvedic tinctures. Graduates of Ayurvedic colleges in Delhi and Calcutta who had passed the

Ayurvedacharya examinations were hired for these operations. Pan-Indian Ayurvedic expertise was privileged over local knowledge and drug preparation followed Sanskrit texts. While local medicinal knowledge in the Central Himalayas was not necessarily subaltern, the Durbar's preference for Sanskritic, text-based knowledge blatantly undermined local expertise. "One of the requirements of the rural population is the replacement of the village quack vaid [doctor] by trained Ayurvedic physicians," officials avowed.



Padiyar Devta, the local forest deity of Gurson Bugyal, is also the protector of livestock. As the *bugyal* becomes increasingly traversed by noisy groups of tourists, the deity is believed to be retreating higher into the mountains.

Photograph by Nivedita Nath.

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The Village of Salud in the distance, from where shepherds migrate up to the *bugyals* every summer.

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Even though the Karyalaya's projects were not fully realized, the Tehri Durbar's move towards the mass plantation and processing of herbs risked dispossessing grazers from meadows, as well as eliding local knowledges related to *jadi butiyan*. The story of the Vanaspati Karyalaya arguably suggests how complex cultural associations between the Himalayas and healing were becoming commodified.

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Nivedita Nath is a PhD candidate in history at UCLA, with a broad interest in the political possibilities that the study of history has for reimagining the places of our collective futures. Her proposed dissertation is entitled "Race, Caste and Modern Imaginaries of the Himalayas: Ecology and Phenomenology in Colonial Kumaun and Garhwal." Tracing the

trajectory of imaginaries of the Himalayas as an ideal site for pilgrimage and asceticism, she argues that the encounter between high Hindu "traditions" and colonial epistemologies transformed conceptual and phenomenological constructions of the "Himalayas," thereby reinforcing hierarchies of race and caste.

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