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ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 31

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Globalizing Local Space and Knowledge: A Study on *Hortus Malabaricus*

Minu Elizabeth George

Hortus Malabaricus is a 17th-century medico-botanical treatise on the medicinal properties of flora of the Malabar coast, which was compiled by Hendrik van Rheedee, the Governor of Dutch Malabar from 1669 to 1676. Van Rheedee was also assisted by native informants in this venture, who disclosed the Ayurvedic traditional knowledge about the plants of Malabar. The speciality of this narrative text was that it was seen as first of its kind, when it came to the representation of a local or indigenous knowledge in a global framework. The present paper is an attempt to study the numerous ways in which this representation is evident in the text.

Keywords: Hortus Malabaricus, Van Rheedee, local space, globalization

Introduction:

Writings regarding indigenous medicines and medical practices have always claimed and maintained its role in the realm of knowledge exploration, especially with the age of scientific revolution and global expansion. Narratives and literary works that surveyed this field often added hitherto unexplored and much valuable data to medical discourses.

The reciprocal relation between literature and medical discourses often helps us to understand the existence of an underlying

knowledge system that is created out of confluence of multiple branches of knowledge. Knowledge regarding botanical science is one of the major factors that contribute to medical discourse and hence, literary outputs associated with information regarding this field were considered valuable since time immemorial. With regard to the history of Kerala, one such repository of medico-botanical and indigenous knowledge that contributed a priceless share in this area is the *Hortus Malabaricus*, which resulted mainly out of the Dutch imperial relations with the land.

Hortus Malabaricus is the one of the oldest, and presumably one of the most important printed books on Indian plants in any European language. The first Europeans who came to the land were interested only in trade and quick profits. With the later arrivals like that of the Dutch, the imperial motives became more complicated and manifold. It was under the initiative of the Dutch Governor of Cochin, Hendrik Adriaan Van Rheede, a scientific exploration of the local natural resources was carried out, resulting in the production of *Hortus Malabaricus*. The uniqueness of this work lies in the fact that the work gives detailed information including the medicinal powers and methods of applications regarding several hundred medicinal plants which were used by the Ayurvedic physicians of 17th century. In addition to this, they also contributed to increased colonial exploration in this land and also had a global impact. The effort behind this masterpiece was hectic and as K.S. Manilal observes:

It took several years to compile and publish this book, in which Rheede was assisted by dozens of experts including physicians, scientists, artists, plant collectors, interpreters, etc of Malabar and Europe. Among them special mention may be made of brother Mathew, John Caesarius, Itty Achuden, Ranga Bhat, Vinayaka Pandit, Appu Bhat, Emmanuel Carneiro and H. de Donep.(96)

One of the main aims of this paper is to understand how a medico-botanical text that offers information regarding indigenous medical plants and practices act as a medical-literary discourse that places native knowledge in a global framework. The paper also at-

tempts a study on how imperialism leads to globalization of local knowledge and how cultural attachments and local spatial knowledge undergoes changes when indigenous medical knowledge is reformulated and expressed from a European perspective and framework of representation. In case of *Hortus Malabaricus*, the native botanical space of Kerala is the subject that is analysed and represented; and that too, strictly from an imperial perspective that re-presents the indigenous space. Though the local exchange of knowledge from the south-western coast of India and European ideas was in plentitude ever since trade routes were established, there is an elemental space that is lost when local knowledge is reformulated according to the interests of an external agency. To begin with, the various motives behind the publication of this text are explored.

Political reasons behind the origin of *Hortus Malabaricus*:

A brief historical survey of Kerala proves that Van Rheede explicitly had clear cut political reasons regarding publishing the text of this magnitude. With the displacement of Portuguese power from south-west India, Dutch power gained its supremacy over various regions of the land. The then Supreme Commander, Admiral Rijcklof Volckertsz van Goens, strongly suggested on making Colombo the second eastern capital of the Dutch. Van Rheede opposed this suggestion and preferred Malabar as the capital and the main centre of Dutch trade operations. He hoped that documenting the medicine, food and timber riches of the Malabar would convince the authorities to make Cochin the second capital instead of Ceylon (Jain).

Financial motives:

Kerala is a land that always tempted and offered infinite scope in financial gains to the imperial powers that came to the land. The unique geographical location and the presence of wide-range natural resources that invited special attention and an exotic appeal made the land a mystical space to foreign eyes.

Since earlier times, the Arab traders used to collect the unique medicinal plants from the Kerala coast and make a huge profit by selling the same in European markets, where they had a massive demand. The Dutch militia in India used to import medicinal plants re-

quired for their usage and Van Rhee de, who keenly observed the local people understood that the native botanical plants had therapeutic properties similar to the imported medicines. Further, Van Rhee de also noted that the imported medicinal plants almost lost their therapeutic properties due to the time lapse with which they were received in India. Van Rhee de was convinced of this huge financial and practical loss experienced by the Dutch government in this process. This was another reason that prompted the Dutch governor to catalogue the indigenous flora. He calculated that a detailed knowledge regarding the same will make the Dutch self-sufficient in understanding the local medical resources and practices, and thereby can avoid the huge financial loss they faced by importing the necessary medicines to India (Chidambaran 56).

Academic interest behind *Hortus Malabaricus*:

Van Rhee de's own account, given in the text hints out his genuine interest in appreciation of the natural wealth of the Malabar Coast and a wish to compile indigenous knowledge about them. The authenticity and accuracy of the work also made *Hortus Malabaricus* stand out as a unique work. Van Rhee de assumed that cataloguing indigenous knowledge will open up a new field of exploration for European students; and to facilitate it, he was keen in incorporating the help of eminent translators and academic experts in curating the work. He also presented Kerala as a space that offers immense opportunities of exploration in the field of medico-botanical studies.

The nature of text and its academic framework too holds importance in the case of this particular work. In the *Hortus Malabaricus*, Van Rhee de followed a “process of rejecting Arabic classification and nomenclature and European knowledge in favour of a more rigorous adherence to local systems of classification” (Grove 136). Alongside with the same, unlike other illustrated works of same nature compiled at the time, Van Rhee de relied almost entirely on knowledge and information provided by indigenous collaborators who practiced and had a detailed knowledge in the field. Three Konkani Brahmin scholars – Ranga Bhatt, Apu Bhatt and Vinayak Pandito (Apu Botto, Ranga Botto, and Vinaique Pandito) were those informants who provided

textual and scholarly reference. Along with them, ayurvedic physicians from the Ezhava or low-caste toddy tappers too provided the empirical plant knowledge and functional taxonomies of classification.

***Hortus Malabaricus* as a medico-botanical narrative:**

In order to understand how *Hortus Malabaricus* becomes part of medico-botanical discourse, we must understand botany from an eighteenth-century point of view. Several botanical traditions coexisted in this period that became distinguished more sharply in a later period. Applied botany, medical botany, horticulture, agriculture, theoretical botany, nomenclature and taxonomy all came under the single field of study then, and hence, botany was a field of multiple specialities. However, the aspect of 'utility', especially medical utility of plants were given more prominence and importance. The structure of the text too, concentrates mainly on medicinal aspects of the plants. Along with a detailed description of each plant in Latin and its name in four scripts (Latin, Malayalam, Arabic and 'brahmin language' which can either be Sanskrit or Konkani), the medicinal properties of the plant and the methods of preparation and application of the medicines obtained from the plant are also given in the book.

The effectiveness of the ayurvedic medicines depends on the correctness of the plants used in preparing the medicine, as substitutes would naturally dilute its curative powers. The research paper published in the journal *Global Histories*, entitled 'Plants, Power and Knowledge: An Exploration of the Imperial Networks and the Circuits of Botanical Knowledge and Medical Systems on the Western Coast of India Against the Backdrop of European Expansionism', states that Kerala had medical traditions that existed even prior to Ayurvedic tradition. As per the author, Ezhava tradition of healing practices or 'Ezhava vaidyam', as it is called, was prominent among other medical traditions that existed in Kerala. This mode of ayurveda involved a considerable contribution from Buddhism which was a major force from the sixth century to about the eleventh century. This Buddhist tradition of treatment of diseases using plants and the knowledge of the indigenous plants preserved by the Ezhava community was exploited by the European endeavour as suggested by the inclusion of

Itty Achuden in the compilation of *Hortus Malabaricus* which is basically an ethno-botanical treatise on the flora of Malabar (Binny 14).

Medical imperialism and representation of indigenous spaces:

European expansionism and the imperial and colonial associations that gradually followed it often pointed towards a quest for indigenous knowledge and colonization of this ‘knowledge-space’. Botanical and medical knowledge from the East and from the Atlantic coast gradually reached Europe and to the rest of the world as part of Christian and civilizing missions. As Schiebinger observes in the text *Plants and Empire*, “botany in this period was big science and big business, an essential part of the projection of military might into the resource-rich East and West Indies. It was precisely because finding and identifying valuable plants was so important to state purposes” (5). During a period where medical innovations and medicines were developing; and injury and disease posed a serious threat to a nation’s military wealth, this factor constituted a greater source of knowledge that saved lives. Hence, expanding medical capacities – the quest for useful healing techniques and remedies, assumed a central place in the strategic planning of every imperial and commercial enterprise.

There were other reasons too, for the pursuit of botany and indigenous medical knowledge. The interest in procuring exotic commodities was indirectly associated with honour, prestige and social mobility. The study of indigenous spaces and the knowledge obtained from these explorations made them an authority figure. Many imperial powers expressed this authority by publishing ‘authoritative’ books on science and travel.

The representation of indigenous spaces in a European framework often points to a close interaction of divergent and often contradicting knowledge systems. *Hortus Malabaricus* closely follows the European practice of taxonomy, classification and typology of the seventeenth century botanical practices that was followed in Europe. The practice of obtaining botanical specimens and collecting samples which is characteristic of is also a European practice and thus, puts local knowledge in a global framework of representation.

Conclusion:

The Ayurvedic system of medicine claims to have effective remedies for many of the common illnesses of man. The ancient residents of India, who were a highly civilized people, had great faith in it. Since it is a way of living and practice that is closely associated with nature, Ayurveda is often seen as a holistic mode that offers health and fitness. It is in this context the globalization of local knowledge evident in *Hortus Malabaricus* becomes important and worthy of further analysis and study. The accurate identification of the medicinal plants described in the texts is ascertained and has gained more importance due to its placement in global context, which is aptly done by Van Rheede. The ethno-botanical knowledge of Malabar, gained a global audience and context inspite of its localized nature due to Van Rheede's initiative and thus escalated to a new realm of exploration and the contribution of *Hortus Malabaricus* in this aspect will always stand unparalleled.

The spatial identity of local spaces is something that is often overlooked due to its indigenous nature. In the case of a land like Kerala, which has quite a deep and long history of imperial influence due to trade interests and later political dominations, the globalization of knowledge offered by such local spaces is indeed of great impact. The acceptance of a work like *Hortus Malabaricus* points out how introducing such native spaces and ethnographic knowledge into local contexts can offer new viewpoints and contribute more to global knowledge network.

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