

Trees and their Tall Tales

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When I first came to live in the hills, I had as my nearest neighbour a sturdy walnut tree. Every year, when the rain were over, it would produce a generous amount of walnuts. But before I could gather any, the small boys from a nearby village would be up the tree, helping themselves to the nuts. At that time, I was nearly forty, no longer agile enough to climb trees, so to the victors went the spoils! I'll say this for the boys, they did present me with the pocketful of walnuts before leaving.

That old walnut tree was one of the victims when a road was blasted through the grounds of the cottage I'd rented, and I had to move further up the hill. But almost every village in the lower Himalayas, from Kashmir to Kumaon, can boast of several handsome walnut trees, and I am surprised that there are not more of them, for we could be exporting walnuts instead of importing expensive walnuts from America and elsewhere.

The ancients (both in Asia and Europe) believed that the walnut was good for the brain, its kernel being shaped just like the human brain. Let's call it sympathetic medicine.

Almonds are therefore good for the eyes, cashew nuts for kidneys, coconut for head and hair, beetroots for the blood, and lady's fingers for—well, for ladies' fingers!

"Wouldn't you like fingers like this lovely lady's fingers we're having for lunch?" I asked a pretty young visitor.

"No" she said. "They're much too squishy."

Never mind. All our plants are good for something or the other.

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The grandmother and the neem tree had one thing in common: they hated waste. Granny thought it a sin to waste food when there were so many hungry children in the world, and I would be taken to task if I left any unpopular vegetable on my plate. Like her, the neem tree never wastes anything. Its leaves, its bark, its twigs, its seed pods, its oil, all have their uses. The bark is medicinal. The leaves contain a compound that repels insects. The twigs are used as tooth brushes. Oil from the seeds is used in soaps and moisturising creams. An all-purpose tree! Granny would have approved!

I remember walking down an avenue of neem trees on the outskirts of Meerut, many years ago. There had just been a heavy shower, and the road was covered with thousands of neem pods that had been brought down by rain. Now they

were being crushed by pedestrians, cyclists, pony carts, bullock carts. And as they were crushed, they combined with the rain to give out a fresh and invigorating aroma. That was over fifty years ago, but the memory of that heady fragrance remains with me.

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"My love is like a bean field in blossom...." So wrote the nature poet John Clare, and this was certainly a change from poets comparing their loves to delicate lilies and bashful roses. And a bean field gives you something in return for the love you bestow upon it.

The bean is a generous plant. You can eat the beans when they are green and succulent. Or when they are dry, you can eat the pods or legumes. Baked beans on toast! As a young man living alone in London, I survived on beans on toast for over two years; there wasn't much else that I could afford.

Here, in the lower Himalayas, the lovely green bean grows easily, the monsoon rains helping it along. For most of the year, the villages near Mussoorie are without water for irrigation, and they lie dry and fallow. But as soon as the rains break, there is considerable activity on the terraced field, and beans, peas, cucumbers, radishes, corn are soon turning the hillsides green with their foliage and produce. Even as I write, Beena is in the kitchen slicing up fresh green beans to make my favourite 'aloo-beans' sabzi. And tomorrow we will have red beans, rajma. And day after, white beans. Every day, the boys from Kolti, the nearest village, bring us fresh supply of beans. We now have a surfeit of them. I am beginning to look like a fat bean. I can't eat beans forever! Or maybe I can. They are full of goodness, the good earth's bounty. And for those who eat little or no meat, beans provide the necessary protein.

Long ago, during that bleak period in London, when I was living in a small attic room with one tiny window, I planted a bean in a small container of earth. I did not expect anything to come up. But a few days later, a small green shoot made its appearance, and before long I had a climbing bean for company; a reminder that outside the cities, there were still bean fields in blossom.

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(From the *'Musings from the Mountains'*)