

Ethnobotany of the Primitive Tribes in Rajasthan. Prabhakar Joshi. Printwell, Jaipur, India. 1995. Pp. 313. US\$50 (cloth).

Rajasthan is the second-largest state of India, half the size of Texas. It consists mostly of the arid regions in eastern India, along the Pakistani border. Over 5,000,000 of its 29,000,000 inhabitants are considered tribal peoples, living mostly in the rugged hills in the southern part of the state. These people are divided into six major and six minor tribes. Archaeological evidence suggests they may be descended from people who have lived in the region for millenia.

This remarkable book represents an extremely broad-based ethnobotany of the 12 tribes of the area. In addition to common ethnobotanical subjects such as food, medicine, and narcotics, the author addresses unusual topics in great detail, down to which species are used for hats, syringes, umbrellas, and pulleys. Children's toys are discussed, as are ceremonial decorations, musical instruments, tatoos, games, and practical jokes. One game involves a tug of war in which the two contestants are each given the stamen from a particular flower and asked to use it to pull the anther off the opponent's stamen. There are 19 pages devoted to the lyrics of plant-centered folksongs and 12 pages containing plant-related proverbs such as "A *matira* (*Citrullus lanatus*) cannot be placed in the mouth of a goat," i.e., "one cannot go beyond one's means."

If the book has a flaw, it is that the author rarely distinguishes between the various tribes. Information from all 12 is lumped together indiscriminately, even with respect to common names. Certainly there must be some variation among such a large and diverse group of people. Nevertheless, it is a first-class example of empirical ethnobotany, as enjoyable as it is useful.

Joseph E. Laferrière
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