

Chaulmoogra Account Protest

TO THE EDITOR:

I have recently read your editorial "Origin of Chaulmoogra Oil—Another Version" in the April-June 1972 issue of the INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEPROSY. On reading this editorial, I had a few reactions which I think should not go unventilated. I am, therefore, writing this letter to you. The reactions are as follows.

1. Is this mythological story connecting a king in northern India with chaulmoogra oil so authentic and so important as to deserve an editorial in a scientific journal of the status of the INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEPROSY?

2. The king is stated to be the King of Benaras, and he must have flown to the nearby jungles. I would like to point out that nowhere near Benaras is it likely to have the trees from which chaulmoogra oil is obtained. The habitat of the tree which can be identified as *Hydnocarpus wightiana*, is

found on the western coast of the southern peninsula of India. There is an authentic reference to it in the medical treatise by Sushrat. Further there was a time when the product was in great demand both in India and outside countries, and it came solely from that part of India.

3. The name of the king involved in this story is Rama, the King of Benaras. I may say that it is very essential that no confusion is caused by connecting this story with King Rama of Ayodhya, whose life story is written in the great Hindu epic "Ramayana." Perhaps you know that King Rama is held in great esteem by Hindus who respect him, adore him, and many worship him as an incarnation of God. It is, therefore, very essential that it should be made perfectly clear that the King Rama of Benaras has no connection or reference to the well-known King Rama of Ayodhya. I may say that in India when we talk of King Rama, it is usually the well-known Rama, King of Ayodhya.

I request that this letter please be published to avoid any possibility of the confusion referred to in item 3 above.

—Dr. Dharmendra
6/8 Shanti Niketan
New Delhi-21, India 110021

[The bit of folklore history to which Dr. Dharmendra takes some exception, though published in our editorial pages for want of a better section to put it in, was not an editorial in the sense of an attempt at some judgemental or stimulative scientific discussion. It was a footnote to our previous account of the folklore history of chaulmoogra oil (*IJL* 38 [1970] 435-438), for which we had received more reprint requests than we usually get for efforts relating to the editorial pages. We subsequently found the variant account by Dr. Huizenga, which the Chinese Medical Journal some years ago deemed of sufficient interest to warrant publication, albeit not in their editorial pages. Thinking that this might be of supplemental interest to those who had expressed an interest, we published it as a relatively brief quotation from Dr. Huizenga. We read this account in the context of the area it was reportedly derived from and, perhaps from ignorance, never did think of it as being related to the Rama of India referred to by Dr. Dharmendra. We are, of course, pleased that Dr. Dharmendra has settled any misunderstanding that there might be in this respect.

We have found it of interest that this general account apparently has many versions

throughout the Burma, Thailand, Indochina, Malaysia area with different rulers playing the "hero" role. Thus, on a recent visit to South Vietnam we were subtly chided for not having recognized that the "true" account related to King Po Klong Garai, who is venerated for his advanced concepts and contributions to public health and in honor of whom a temple still stands in Vietnam.

Whether or not the present distribution, or at the time of Buddha, of the *Taraktogenos kurzii* ("chaulmoogra tree") or even of *Hydnocarpus anthelmintica* is consonant with the geographical setting of the folktale as attributed to J. F. Rock by Dr. Huizenga, commands no analysis on our part. We hold no brief for the general historic or geographic accuracy of folklore tales. We do, however, find them revealing of social thought and reaction and we find them of practical importance in that familiarity with them enhances the effectiveness and the acceptance of educative efforts regarding leprosy at the village level—at least as far as our experience goes in the South China area.

Whether or not this brief note warranted inclusion in the pages of this JOURNAL is, of course, a matter of judgement. We have on several occasions been told that this JOURNAL is "too scientific." Without agreeing with this thesis, we have, particularly in the editorial pages, attempted to provide some responsive variation in the fare. The presentation under discussion was one such minor effort. —EDITOR]