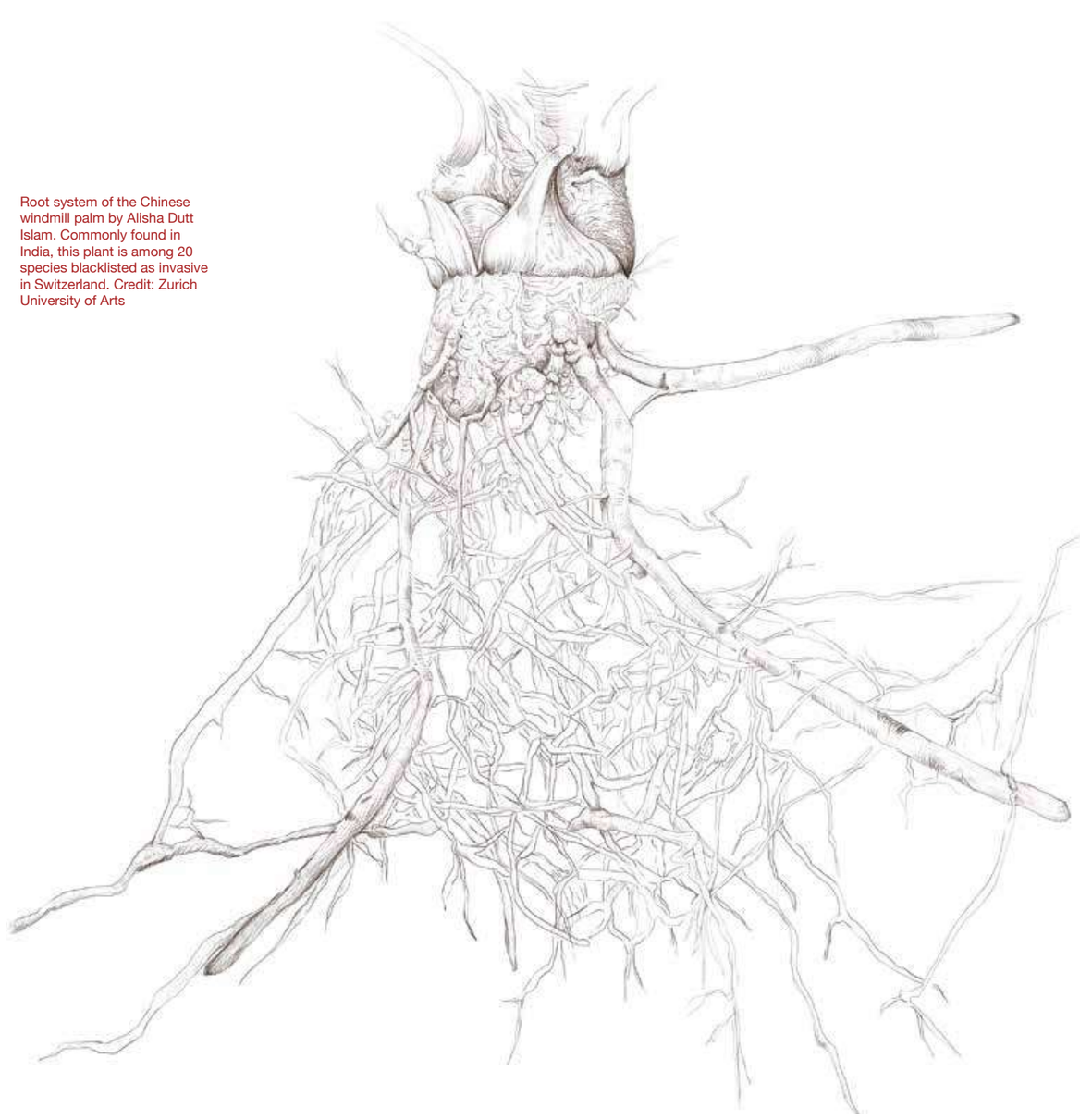


Root system of the Chinese windmill palm by Alisha Dutt Islam. Commonly found in India, this plant is among 20 species blacklisted as invasive in Switzerland. Credit: Zurich University of Arts

More than just a pretty picture

Rooted in India's colonial history, contemporary botanical art is spotlighting conservation, biodiversity, and native species

Benita Fernando

In 2017, a bunch of immigrants became the targets of Italian neo-fascist and right-wing groups in Milan's Piazza Duomo. Only, these immigrants were not people, but palm trees. The palms were planted by coffee giant Starbucks to signal its entry into Italy, and meant as homage to Milan's history of hidden and exotic gardens. Of the 42 palms, the protesters set three ablaze and held up a banner that read, "No to Africanisation of Piazza Duomo".

The palms survived the fire much as they survived Milan's winters. But were the protesters misinformed about the palms' origins? Trachycarpus fortunei or the Chinese Windmill Palm, is not native to Africa, but to parts of Asia. So why was it accused of 'Africanising'?

For Kolkata-born artist and scientific researcher, Alisha Dutt Islam, this incident reinforced her existing interest in T. fortunei. In Switzerland, where Dutt Islam lives, T. fortunei is considered both iconic and invasive. Prized for its exoticness, it is grown as an ornamental plant, leading to its naturalisation and invasion of local forests. Back in India, the palm, with its billowing leaves, is so ubiquitous that it barely draws any attention—or wrath. Dutt Islam says, "It is interesting to consider what 'exotic' means in Europe and, in doing so, I come across a lot of native plants from India."
In 2023, Dutt Islam made botanical drawings of 20 blacklisted, invasive plants in Switzerland, including T. fortunei, as part of her diploma project at the Zurich University of the Arts. Native and invasive species became Dutt Islam's way of commenting on the generalised exoticisation of the global South, as the Piazza Duomo incident showed.

Think 'botanical art' and it conjures one of two things—scientific diagrams in an academic journal or vintage-style prints on a wall. But, it's neither. Its uniqueness lies in the partnership of scientific accuracy and aesthetic appeal. And contemporary Indian artists are intent on expanding its possibilities—using it for conservation and biodiversity projects, to spread awareness on invasive and native species, and ecosystem management, even as they seek to decolonise the genre.

Delhi-based botanical artist and book designer, Malini Saigal, says, "There is a realisation that botanical art is not just 'hotel room' art but a specialised skill. There is a strong, growing movement to re-wild and reclaim the natural vegetation in India, and botanical art has a big role to play in researching, teaching, and publishing."

The demand for botanical imagery in commercial lifestyle projects, such as logo designs, fabric pattern and labels (gin manufactures love botanical imagery), has been around for some years. What we are seeing now is the use of botanical art as a tool for public science communication. And it works precisely because of the genre's allure.

Drawings of desert plants—roheda or Marwar teak (left) and kheer khemp (above)—by Malini Saigal. Courtesy: Malini Saigal

Going local

In 2017, Saigal was commissioned to create a series of botanical works for a boutique hotel near Jodhpur. What started off as a commercial project came as a "total revelation". Saigal says she was struck by the clumps of roheda trees aflame with orange and red and yellow, the spindly silhouettes of the kair bushes, sturdy thhor, and delicate thorny trees. Her curiosity was piqued. Since then, Saigal has been making botanical works on the native species of the Thar region. She says, "Few people are aware of what the true native species are around them. Somehow Company-bagh style gardens are what people understand. Even now, people love winter gardens with cornflowers, buttercups and phlox—all exotic plants."

That's why Abha Mahal Bagh in Nagore, Rajasthan, is unique. It celebrates India's native desert plants, and them alone. To help visitors understand this garden better, the Mehrangarh Museum Trust got designer Anjali Nair to create a booklet, who in turn commissioned Dutt Islam to make a suite of botanical drawings of the plants in the garden.

The garden was the brainchild of naturalist and restoration practitioner Pradip Krishen, who was asked by arts philanthropist Lady Helen Hamlyn to undertake the project. "If the plants look alien", Krishen says, "it's because much of India belongs to the Indo-Malayan biological realm. It all looks eastward, whereas in the desert, it extends all the way to northern Africa. So that's why the things you see in the desert tend not to be represented elsewhere in the country."

As with the landscape, so with the art. Historically, native desert species didn't find significant representation in Indian botanical art collections. Seen in this light, Saigal's and Dutt Islam's series could well be the first of their kinds. Krishen says, "As Rajputana wasn't British territory, you didn't have British surgeon-turned-botanists exploring the flora of the desert like they did all along the Coromandel coast and elsewhere in East India Company territory."

Putting down roots

The genre of botanical art is tied to the history of the East India Company. The “first great flowering of Indian botanical painting”, as botanist Martyn Rix puts it in his book Indian Botanical Art: an illustrated history, took place in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It started as a mode of documentation parallel to herbaria as specimens did not survive India’s humid conditions or the long voyage to England. Rix writes that “doctor-botanists" were instructed to concentrate on economic and medicinal plants, but their enthusiasm for classification led them to study the vast range of plants that they encountered. They also set up “experimental gardens” to grow medicinal plants in a bid to cater to the army’s medical needs and, later, for export.

Vinita Damodaran, professor of South Asian History and director of the Centre for World Environmental History at Sussex University, UK, cites the example of Scottish surgeon and botanist, William Roxburgh, one of the early directors of the Calcutta Botanic Garden in the late 18th century. Roxburgh used local artists to illustrate the plants he described, which included those of economic value such as breadfruit, coffee, pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, jackfruit and indigo. Damodaran says, “Breadfruit originated in Tahiti and was sent by the British first primarily to the Caribbean as food for slaves, so the economic value is quite apparent…But, Roxburgh was also interested in plants, the natural environment and the impact of deforestation on climate, and the resulting famines. The droughts and the famines of the late 18th century worried him and he started his meteorological diary and advocated the planting of supplementary food plants, such as coconuts and breadfruit.”

“The British produced a veritable doomsday book of botany and natural history in India,” Damodaran adds. In a time when conservation didn’t exist as a specialised field—its need would be felt only in the next century—colonial botanical art was a nod to India’s biodiversity.

However, colonialism set in motion plant transfers and the propagation of non-native species—for profit or ornamentation—in the colonies of European powers. The correlations between colonisation and the spread of invasive species have only increased with modern globalisation. A 2022 study by Alok Bang, assistant professor at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, reveals that invasive alien species cost the Indian economy between ₹8.3 trillion to ₹11.9 trillion over 1960–2020.

India’s invasive species, such as lantana, carrot grass, bitter vine, and, surprisingly, robusta coffee and lawn grass, are the focus of a new book titled Guests Who Never Left: Common Invasive Alien Plants of Peninsular India, authored by six conservationists, academics and ecologists, and published by Nature Conservation Foundation and Biodiversity Collaborative.

Bengaluru-based ecologist, Ravi Jambhekar, who illustrated 50 species for the book, says, “The book’s researchers joked that my botanical drawings must not be pretty because these are invasive species. They didn’t want people to buy them and plant them.” It was a tricky balance—to convey the danger and the beauty of these plants—rather than outright dismiss them. After all, what’s invasive in one land is native to another.

Ravi Jambhekar’s early botanical works were of leaves fallen on the forest floor. Courtesy: Ravi Jambhekar

A drawing of the Mexican Poppy by Ravi Jambhekar for *Guests Who Never Left: Common Invasive Alien Plants of Peninsular India.* Courtesy: Ravi Jambhekar

Jambhekar’s love for botanical art began in 2018, while working on his doctoral thesis in the Western Ghats in Goa. After the morning’s fieldwork, the rest of the day stretched ahead without internet connectivity. Bereft of online surfing or social media, there were two options—to read academic papers or to sketch. Jambhekar chose the latter. He would venture into nearby forests and pick leaves from the forest floor. “I would never pluck them,” he recalls, “These fallen leaves had much more beautiful colours and shapes because of herbivory by insects and leaf-eating herbivores.”

A self-taught artist, Jambhekar’s most recent work is on a series of medicinal plants—many of which are threatened—for the Arunachal Pradesh Forest Department. There is Paris polyphylla, grown for both ornamental and medicinal reasons, and listed as vulnerable due to human activities by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Jambhekar is hopeful for the ongoing renaissance of botanical art in India. “We are seeing how both fields—art and science—are making the best use of each other,” he says.

Artistic licence, scientific accuracy

Pradip Krishen says that one of the advantages that botanical art has over photography is how it can "essentialise" a plant, without the noise of the background. The genre allows artists to present different stages of growth—from bud to fruiting, for instance—on the same plant. It's a bit of manipulation in the service of naturalism. It's why conservation and biodiversity projects may prefer botanical art over photography, as the latter doesn't convey everything it needs to.

Bengaluru-based artist Nirupa Rao echoes similar sentiments. She says, "I am not aiming for photorealism. I have no interest in competing with the camera. And I am averse to the idea of making plants look ornamental."

Rao's distinctive style renders plants as if they are made of muscle and sinew. In her art, a petal is not a fragile, delicate thing pressed between the pages of a book but something rugged and resilient, braving the forces of nature. She paints her flora with deep jewel tones that convey the landscape from which they originate—the dark, brooding jungles of the Western Ghats, with heavy rainfall and patches of sunlight.

Among the reasons Rao turned to botanical art were books from England that she encountered, first as a child and then as an intern at Bloomsbury Publishing in London. These books were evocative of the English landscape, its wild flowers and woodland creatures. Rao says, "They were cutely illustrated and I wished that growing up I had these about my own landscape. I didn't know botanical art at that time. I just wanted to make these books about India."

With this in mind, Rao co-created Hidden Kingdom (2019), a book for adults and children on the "fantastical plants" of the Western Ghats. In its pages is a carnivorous sundew, its tentacles glistening, giving it the appearance of a Martian creature that might jump out of the page. There is also the velvety and corpulent lily of the elephant foot yam—a tuber that is commonly consumed in India but rarely allowed to flower.
Rao and the team went for the "crazy, kooky" species because they wanted to challenge people's perception of what a plant is. A sundew is carnivorous because it grows on lateritic plateaus with poor soil fertility and thus supplements its nutritional needs by eating insects. Rao says, "Plants are active agents. They are not passive, ornamental creatures, which is how they are often portrayed in botanical art."

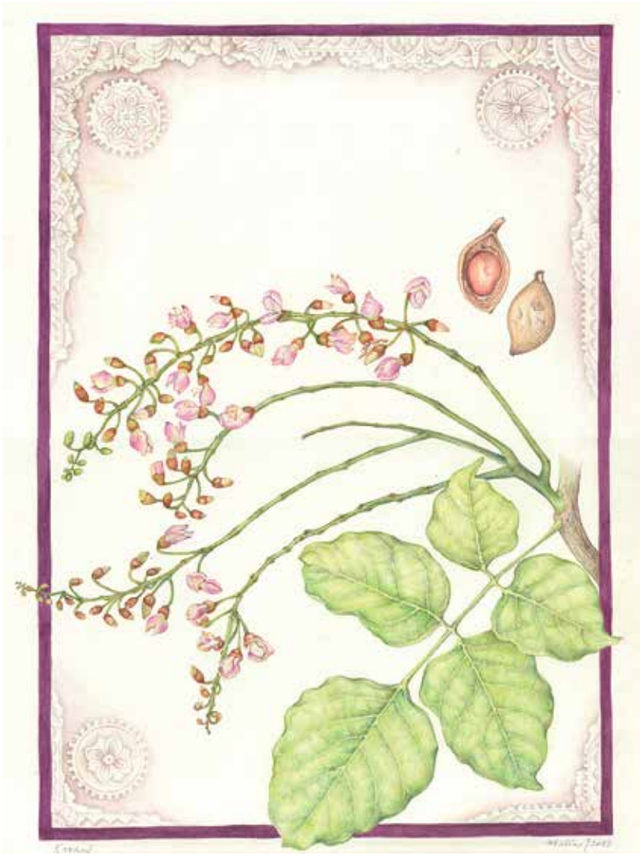
Rao's latest project uses botanical art backgrounds for Spirit of the Forest, an animated film that she has co-directed. The backgrounds are lush with her art—myristica's stilt roots anchored in the swamp; its long leaves set like jewels; and, the sense of something larger at work. The film raises awareness about the freshwater myristica, or wild Indian nutmeg, swamps of south India, through the experiences of a young protagonist who stumbles upon a seed and learns of its hidden power. Rao says, "I wanted to show how much history, present and future can be packed into something like a little seed."

A still from *Spirit of the Forest*, an animated film co-directed by Nirupa Rao, that focuses on the myristica swamps of south India. Courtesy: Nirupa Rao

Carnivorous sundews from Nirupa Rao's Hidden Kingdom (2019), a book of fantastical plants found in the Western Ghats. Courtesy: Nirupa Rao

Reclaiming a legacy

The renewed interest in botanical art has also led to more means of learning the skill in India. Earlier artists sought out courses abroad, such as those offered by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in the UK, or Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh in Scotland. Today there is artist Hemlata Pradhan's The School for Natural History Art in Kalimpong. In 2019, the Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park in Mehrangarh Fort, Rajasthan—designed again by Pradip Krishen—kickstarted its annual botanical workshop. It draws people from various backgrounds, including architects,



Malini Saigal's botanical drawing of the Indian Beech with stylised border motifs from the Mughal-era tomb of Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan. Courtesy: Malini Saigal

woodworkers, filmmakers, and IT professionals. Mentors have included Nirupa Rao, British artist Kate Bowen, and Malini Saigal.

Saigal also designed and taught a course called 'Art Plantae' at Ashoka University, NCR, in which she looked at various aspects of plant depiction, including plants in cosmology, Mughal paintings, and chintz patterns. She was considering plant portraiture as it appeared outside of the Company's commissions. Mughal paintings had detailed floral depictions but fell out of favour because they looked decorative and used a flat perspective. The Company preferred a more naturalistic representation, influenced by the rules of the Renaissance and for scientific reasons.

"Take motifs like the tulip and the narcissus. Artists carved and painted these on monuments or textiles. I try to incorporate these motifs in the borders that I make for my works," she says. Saigal, who studied art history before her shift to practising art, considers how other forms of Indian botanical art, and not just the ones commissioned by English or Scottish "doctor-botanists", can be used to inform botanical works.

For a while, botanical art from India was perceived as part of the contentious category of "Kampani Kalam" or Company School, named after the East India Company and other trading companies. It suggested a top-down approach, as if local Indian artists or chitrakars were art-directed by the commissioning naturalists. However, new scholarship in the area views the genre more as a collaboration between the commissioners and the artists, with much interest in the backgrounds and styles of the latter.

Even so, many contemporary Indian botanical artists believe that they may have greater agency than their historical counterparts and re-examine the genre itself. For artist Laila Vaziralli, based out of Pomburpa in Goa, this has meant looking alternative traditions surrounding plants rather than colonial classification systems for her botanical-themed works. Local plant folklore, ritual, and personal memory are central to an ongoing series on the jasmine, native to India, and the night jasmine (Raat ki Rani), naturalised in India. Vaziralli says, "I have distinct memories of sneaking out at night, with no shoes on, into the garden to get a whiff of Raat Ki Rani in full bloom. I heard stories of how the Queen of the Night only blooms after dark because the Sun God broke her heart."

It may not always seem that a portrait of jasmine or desert plants is revolutionary but botanical art is a beguiling genre. Underneath its beauty and precision is a tool of resistance. We have discovered of late that palm trees, olive groves, watermelons and oranges are potent symbols, whether in a landscape or in art. Plants are political. Choosing which ones to draw is just as political.

Benita Fernando is an independent journalist based out of Mumbai and the recipient of the first SAF Arts Journalism Grant.

Laila Vaziralli uses a mix of science and folklore to inform her botanical-themed works, such as this one based on the Raat ki Rani. Courtesy: Laila Vaziralli