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EDIBLE TRADITIONS

BY PATRICIA KLINDIENST

A PUNJABI GARDEN

Excerpt from Ch. 6, "Peace"
from The Earth Knows My Name

"I told my father, 'I will be poorer in America, but my conscience will be free.'"

I write the words on a paper napkin and turn it to face her. "Is this right? Is this what you just said?"

"Yes. I did not come to America to trade my cultural heritage for money."

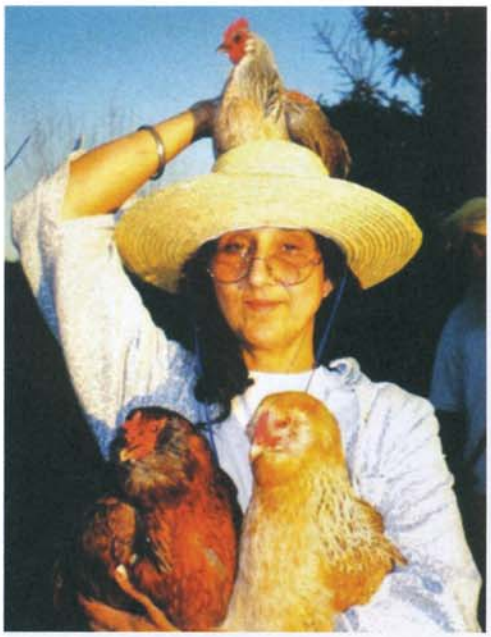
I take the napkin back and write the second sentence as well. Her works are so striking that I do not want to rely on memory alone to record them. Ruhan Kainth is telling me why she left Indira Gandhi's India in the late 1970s to come to the United States.

I first met Ruhan, a middle school science teacher from Fullerton, California, and her husband, Atma, an engineer, in New Haven. They were visiting colleges on a crisp and shining day in early autumn, and they were looking for a place to take their youngest son, Hunar, to lunch. From Atma's turban and the steel bracelet on his right wrist, a kara, I knew that they were Sikhs. I tried to think where the nearest Indian restaurants were, but Hunar wanted pizza.

I explained their options—Naples Pizza, just around the corner, or Pepe's or Sally's, across town in Worcester Square.

"We would prefer to walk," Ruhan said. "Would you join us?"

Sitting in Naples Pizzeria, I asked Ruhan why she had come to America. She came for freedom of conscience, fleeing India during a period of intense political repression under Indira Ghandi. And then I asked if she and Atma had a garden. "Oh yes!" Ruhan said. "We have a beautiful garden. And I have a tree that is rarely grown outside of India. It is called the neem tree. In India, the neem is a sacred tree. There is a story to go with this tree," she added, leaning toward me. "The emperor Ashoka, whose name means 'without sorrow, converted to Buddhism. He was India's first Buddhist emperor and led India on the path to nonviolence. He dedicated his life to promoting peace, prosperity, and health for all of his people. His



edicts about how we should treat each other in every aspect of life were inscribed on stone pillars that were placed in every village. You can still see some of them in certain places. Among the things he recommended was that every village should have a neem tree, first for shade from the intense heat, then for all of its wonderful healing properties. You must come and be our guest, and I will show you the garden, and you will see our neem tree."

Late the following summer, after a long, slow drive from the Los Angeles airport, a van drops me in front of the Kainths' house at the end of a cul-de-sac in the sprawling suburb of Fullerton. Ruhan, slim and striking, her long black hair coiled in a chignon, comes out to greet me and introduces me to her two older sons, Koijan and Daraspreet, both members of the US International Field Hockey team. They step over open boxes of newly arrived equipment to shake my hand, then carry my bags into the house, where Ruhan offers me a glass of juice made from passion fruit and strawberries freshly picked that morning.

When we go out the back door a few moments later, the first thing I see is a pomegranate tree laden with huge red orbs. Native to southwestern Asia, the pomegranate is as familiar to Ruhan as an apple is to a New Englander. However extravagantly beautiful this tree, it is by no means the most extraordinary citizen of this garden. On less than one eighth of an acre, Ruhan Kainth cultivates more than 50 varieties of fruits, vegetables, and herbs. The thick canopies of the trees and the densely planted beds of herbs and flowers dampen the drone of traffic and block the view of neighboring houses. "For years, nothing would grow here," Ruhan says. "The soil was dead."

I turn to her in disbelief. Later, when I peer over the fences that divide one yard from another, I see why. On one side, a perfectly weedless lawn mowed to uniform height rolls from the house to a row of dark green shrubs lined up in strict symmetry against a stockade fence. Decades of use of lawn chemicals to maintain the iconic suburban American landscape have destroyed the structure of the soil here.

Top right: The cherimoya fruit finds a suitable growing environment in Southern California. Far right: Atma Kainth under the jamun tree.

To bring the soil back to life, Ruhan began to plant tiny trees, which was all she could afford. As the trees' roots threaded their way downward, they loosened the soil and slowly began to add organic matter. "Then the earth around them would begin coming to life again," she explains.

Until she came to America, Ruhan had never been able to make her own garden. How, then, did she know to plant trees?

In India, her family, members of an educated and prosperous elite, lived in Delhi, where they had a beautiful formal garden. They also owned a farm in the country two hours' drive away, where sharecroppers worked the orchard and grew sugarcane. As a girl, Ruhan would go to the village with her father, walking through the fields chewing cane, sucking out the sugar, then throwing the husks on the compost pile. She drank freshly made jaggery from the press worked by oxen; the juice was boiled in a great caldron to produce a crystallized brown sugar akin to maple sugar candy.

When Ruhan's father became the private physician of the prime minister of Nigeria, which took him abroad for long periods, he put her in charge of supervising the farm, an unusual role for a woman. Her brothers were at Eton and Harrow in England, so the task fell to her. "Once a month I'd go out to the farm," she says. "They all welcomed me, but they'd be very amused, because they were not used to seeing a woman coming to do that. But they were very respectful." Even the fact that she drove there by herself made her remarkable.

As she learned to manage the farm, Ruhan learned the principle of returning everything organic to the soil. "Nothing goes to waste in those Indian villages," she says. The lesson has stayed with her. "Those were times of great peace," she says, her voice soft as she remembers. On the farm, Ruhan stepped beyond the constraints of her caste, class, and gender.

At home in Delhi, the family garden was full of roses, fruit trees, and flowers. Peacocks roamed the grounds freely. Though she longed to work in the garden, Ruhan was expected to do no more than stroll and admire. "We had a full-time gardener who would come to work in the evening. During the day he worked as the supervisor of the Rashtrapati Bhavan, which had once been the residence of the British Viceroy,

Lord Mountbatten." He became Ruhan's mentor. "He would treat me like the little granddaughter. I would follow him around the garden, asking him how to do things. 'Could you show me how you graft the roses?' I would ask. 'Little baby, he would say, 'do you want to see this?' And he would show me. I can still see myself standing there. He would say, 'See, baby? See how you do this?' I learned so much from him."

Ruhan knew this man only as Mali, which means "gardener" in Hindi.

"He was of a caste who did not have the opportunity to go to British schools," Ruhan explains. "He rarely came in the house. And when he did, he would not sit down."

If he remained conscious of the expectations of caste indoors, she felt the strict limits of her gender and class in the garden. "I would go pick up the spade and maybe plant a seed or something, but nobody would ever see me digging." Yet she longed to. It was not considered appropriate for her to mingle with gardeners.

"Was there any other way to learn what I wanted to know?" she asks. "No—only from gardeners, only from the laborers."

Sir Albert Howard, the famous British advocate of soil restoration, learned how to grow things in the same way, upsetting British imperial presumptions about what constitutes knowledge. In two of his most famous works, An Agricultural Testament (1940) and The Soil and Health (1947), he describes his education on the land among the rural poor of colonial India.

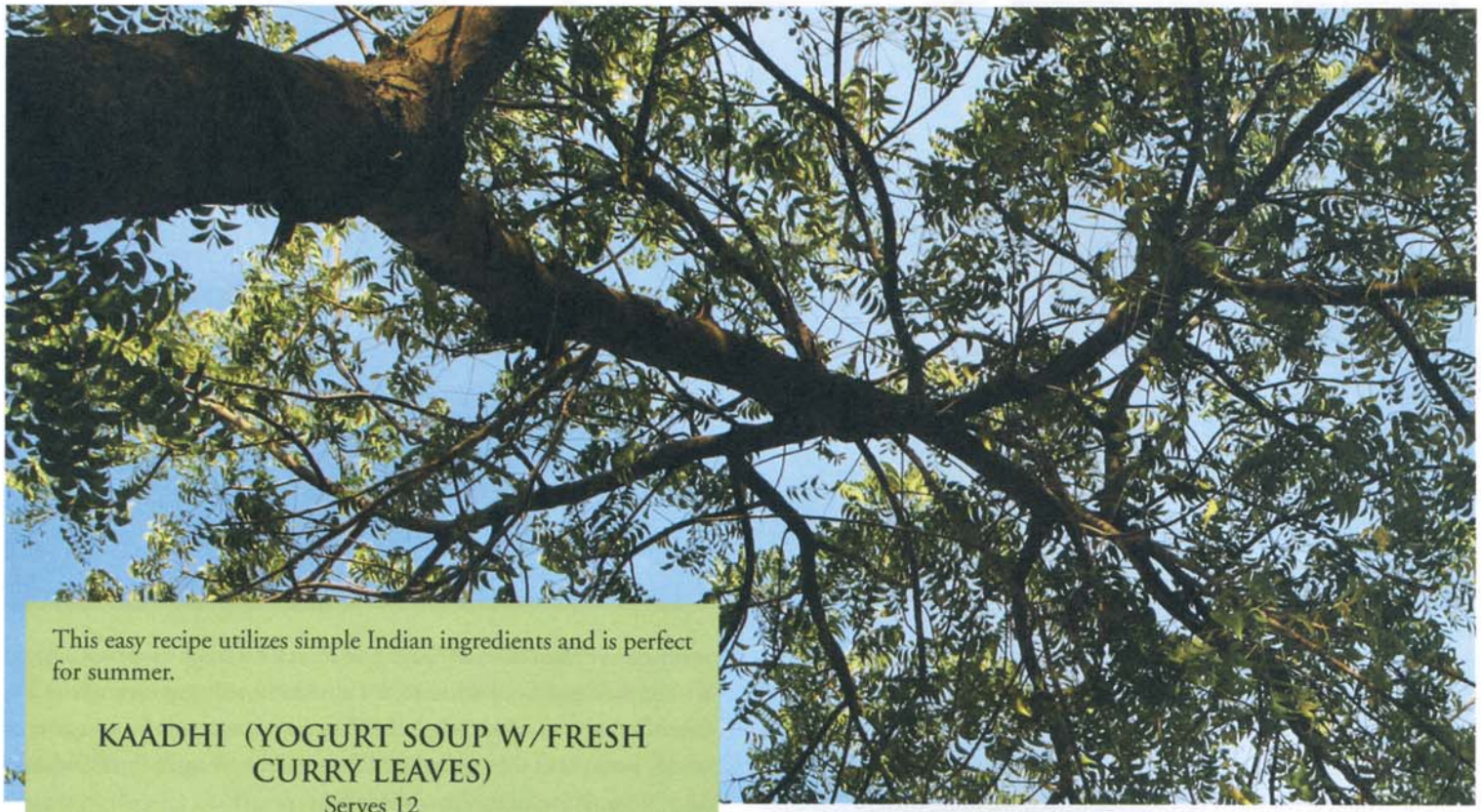
Trained at the Royal College of Science in London and at St. John's College, Cambridge, Howard was appointed mycologist and agricultural lecturer in the Imperial Department of Agriculture for the West Indies in 1899. From 1899 to 1902 he worked on plantations in Barbados, a former center of the English slave trade, where he studied fungal diseases of plantation cash crops, including sugar. "In Barbados I was a laboratory hermit," he wrote in the introduction to The Soil and Health, "a specialist of specialists, intent on learning more and more about less and less." It was "contact with the land" and the people who worked the land that showed him the fundamental weakness in the hierarchical organization of academic agricultural studies. "I was an investigator of plant diseases, but I had myself no crops on which I could try out the remedies I advocated: I could not take my own advice before offering it to other people." When he was offered the post of economic botanist at the Agricultural Research Institute in Pusa, India, in May 1905, Howard readily accepted.

The crops of India's peasant farmers, Howard observed, proved remarkably resistant to pests and disease. Yet the farmers were illiterate, had no access to advanced technology, had received no scientific training, and never used chemical fertilizers, pesticides, or fungicides. Poor by every standard of modern industrialized cultures, their soil, their crops, and their animals nevertheless enjoyed robust health. How was this possible? What were they doing that made their agriculture so productive?

"I found," Howard wrote, "I could do no better than watch the operations of the peasants and regard them and the pests as my best instructors."

Though he had grown up on a farm in England and had received the finest education Britain could offer, it took Howard years to become as proficient a farmer as the rural poor of India. "At the end of five years' tuition under my new professors," he wrote, " the attacks of insects and fungi on all crops whose root systems suited the local soil conditions became negligible. By 1910 I had learnt how to grow healthy crops, practically free from disease, without the slightest help from mycologists, entomologists, bacteriologists, agricultural chemists, statisticians, clearing-houses of information, artificial manures, spraying machines, insecticides, fungicides, germicides, and all the other expensive paraphernalia of the modern experiment station."

It was coming to understand the mycorrhizal association, the process by which plants feed directly from the soil, deriving the protein necessary to support life, that helped Howard understand why rural farmers' practice of returning the manure of their farm animals to the soil proved so effective. If we interrupt this symbiotic relationship with chemicals that kill the healthy fungi responsible for the uptake of proteins, the soil dies and nothing will grow. "One simple principle," Howard wrote, underlies the "vast accumulation of disease which now afflicts the world." The "undernourishment of the soil is the root of



The neem tree, often called the "village pharmacy," is used in Ayurvedic medicine.

all." By 1940 he had concluded that "the slow poisoning of the life of the soil by artificial manures is one of the great calamities of mankind."

The power to resist disease, to confer health and contentment on humankind, Howard argued, lay in mimicking natural cycles of growth, decay, and regeneration by returning all organic matter to the soil. "The failure to maintain a healthy agriculture," he wrote during World War II, "has largely cancelled out all the advantages we have gained from our improvements in hygiene, housing, and our medical discoveries."

Sixty years ago, Howard argued that the way we grow our food—the way we till the soil in our own backyards—engages us with politics at the most fundamental level.

To the representatives of Empire who sent Howard to teach the rural poor of India how to garden, he replied with the news that the flow of wisdom traveled in the opposite direction—up from the poor to the rich, from the colonized to the colonizer.

Ruhan Kainth made the same discovery 40 years later. When she found the dead soil that chemical fertilizers inevitably produce in her backyard in California, the wisdom of her humble teachers in India helped her to restore it to life.

To read the conclusion of Patricia Klindienst's story "Peace", visit www.ediblela.com

This easy recipe utilizes simple Indian ingredients and is perfect for summer.

KAADHI (YOGURT SOUP W/FRESH CURRY LEAVES)

Serves 12

3- inch piece of fresh ginger
9 cloves of garlic
3 green chilies
1 ½ tsp cumin seeds
½ heaping cup of chickpea flour
3 cups of water
1 ½ quarts of yogurt
3 tsp salt
3 tsp sugar
½ cup of vegetable oil
1 ½ tsp black mustard seeds
3 tsp fenugreek seeds
3 tsp coriander seeds
¼ tsp turmeric
50 fresh curry leaves (can be found at most Asian markets)

Process ginger, garlic, chilies, and cumin seeds into a coarse textured paste, paying close attention to breaking up chilies. Set paste aside.

In a heavy saucepan combine chickpea flour and 1 ½ cups water and whisk until smooth. Stir in remaining 1 ½ cups of water and yogurt, salt, sugar, and ginger garlic paste. Bring soup to bare simmer uncovered for 6-8 minutes. Taste and adjust the salt and sugar. Salt to brighten and focus the flavors and sugar to smooth any tart or rough edges in yogurt. Remove from heat.

Heat oil over medium high heat. Add mustard seeds, fenugreek seeds, and coriander seeds. Cook until mustard seeds stop popping, about 30 seconds. Add turmeric and curry leaves and stir a few seconds until leaves are crisp. Pour the seasoned oil over soup. Serve in bowls with a little chopped coriander.