



Research article

Sacred plants from ancient to modern era: Traditional worshipping towards plants conservation

Deepti Pandey^{1*} and Vimal Chandra Pandey²

¹Department of Ancient Indian History & Archaeology, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, India

²Plant Ecology and Environmental Science Div., CSIR-National Botanical Research Institute, Lucknow, India

*Corresponding Author: deeptipandey@hotmail.com

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Abstract: The present research paper describes the sacred plants of the Indo-Gangetic plain and their associated deity and festivals. Several intensive surveys were carried out to find the definite role and importance of nine sacred plant species in the Indo-Gangetic plain, India in the life style, religious activities and health care. These sacred plants are used in variety of ceremonies in various ways throughout the year by the people of study area. Furthermore, these plants are considered as sacred due to their medicinal, aesthetic and natural qualities. Thus, our ancestors linked various God and Goddess with several plants for their conservation and named as sacred plants. These ancient beliefs show the human relation with plants which are also helpful in the conservation of plant species for their valuable qualities.

Keywords: Ancient beliefs - Plants conservation - Sacred plants - Traditional worshipping.

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INTRODUCTION

The ancient beliefs show the relation of human beings and plants. The plant worshipping was quite common in a highly evolved Harappan culture, dating the third or fourth millennium B.C. It was also present among the seals of Mohenjo-daro, one seal depicted a stylised Peepal (*Ficus religiosa* L.) tree with two heads of unicorns emerging from its stem. Tree worshipping was also present during the Vedic period (Bhatla *et al.* 1984). In India, many religious festivals are celebrated by the people from Kashmir to Kanyakumari as India is known for its diversity like religion, customs, myths, languages, culture etc. Furthermore, all people celebrate religious festivals with scientific background and use one or several plants or plant parts in their ceremonies. The various parts of plants have been used as a source of medicine by man from ancient to modern era (Bisht & Badoni 2009, Mehra *et al.* 2014, Kumaran & Citarasu 2015, Truyen *et al.* 2015, Bajpai *et al.* 2016). Our ancestors lived and spent their life in nature. They had a very strong belief on the basis of their knowledge about the valuable qualities of plants (Bajpai *et al.* 2016). Man secured his life from diseases by using various parts of medicinal plants. So, probably this became the basis of conserving plants and might have started worshipping plants (Sharma & Joshi 2010, Mehra *et al.* 2014). Folklore, culture, food and medicinal practices are deeply linked and influenced by plants (Badoni & Badoni 2001). On the basis of ancient scriptures, a wide variety of plants like *Ficus religiosa* L., *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss., *Ocimum tenuiflorum* L. etc. has divine qualities, therefore used in number of religious activities, marriages and other ceremonies (Robinson & Cush 1997). India has deep-rooted traditional worshipping of plants, which provide base for the grass root conservation practices (Gadgil 1987, 2000, Gadgil & Rao 1998). In this paper some of the plants species which have divine qualities for human health and medicinal practices but held sacred in the Indo-Gangetic plain of India are discussed.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study site description

The Indo-Gangetic plain was selected as the present study site (Fig. 1). This region is known for the Indus Valley Civilization, which was liable for the birth of ancient culture. According to ancient Indian history, this region was also referred to as Aryavarta (Land of Aryans) during Vedic and Epic eras. The Indo-Gangetic plain is also known as Indus-Ganga and the North Indian River Plain (Taneja *et al.* 2014). The Ganga is the leading

river of this region after whose name this plain is named. The Ganga and its tributaries have brought large quantities of alluvium soil from the mountains and deposited it here to build this plain.

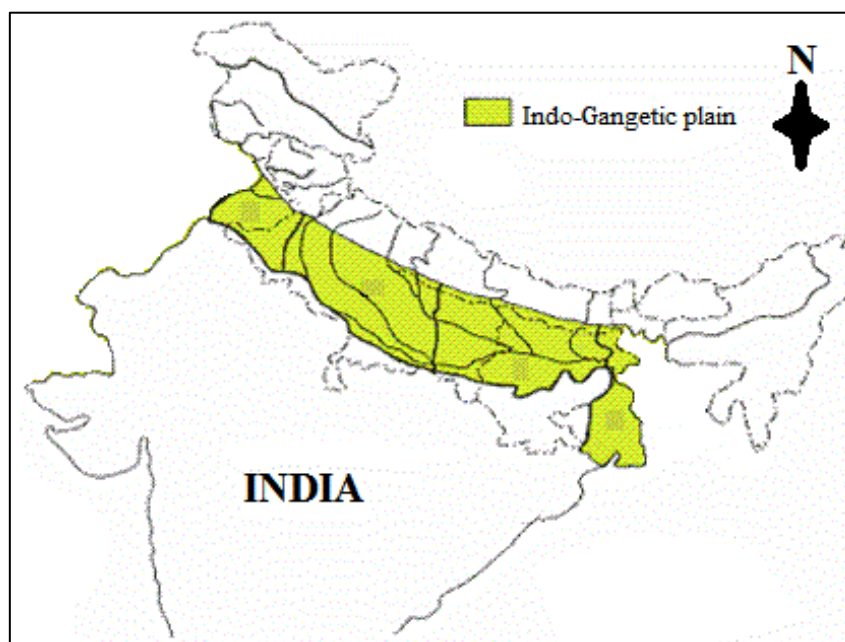


Figure 1. Location map of study site: Indo-Gangetic plain.

Methodology

The present study is based on intensive field surveys during 2010–2011. Identification of the collected sacred plant specimens were done at Herbarium of National Botanical Research Institute, Lucknow. The present information regarding sacred plant was collected through consulting the local people, villagers, traditional medicine practitioners and priests of the temples to know the local name, sacred value and medicinal importance of mentioned plants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study reveals nine sacred plants species are of great medicinal value, associated God and Goddess and have religious significance (Table 1). It also provides the information on sacred plants based festivals, their month, deity and sacred beliefs (Table 2). These sacred plants are worshiped by the local people of the Indo-Gangetic plain of India in various religious activities, marriages and traditional medicine practices. The details of sacred plants and their associated God and Goddess as well as medicinal importance are described in table 1. The medicinal importance of the plants is mentioned by several researchers in their studies (Kumar *et al.* 2012, 2013). From ancient time to present day, the people depend upon plants for food, fodder, fibre, fuel, shelter, shade and medicine. The Vedas has described the close relationship between man, nature and religion. But the religious and festival aspects of sacred plants of the Indo-Gangetic plain are given a few attentions but not much explored. These nine sacred plants symbolize a specific God or Goddess because of their medicinal, aesthetic and natural qualities.

Table 1. List of sacred plants and associated God and Goddess who residing in these plants.

S.No.	Local Name	Scientific Name	Family	Associated God & Goddess	Medicinal Value
1	Kela	<i>Musa balbisiana</i> Colla	Musaceae	Lord Brihaspati, Vishnu	Fruits are taken with milk as remedy for body weakness.
2	Bel	<i>Aegle marmelos</i> (L.) Correa	Rutaceae	Lord Shiva	Digestive disorders have been cured by ripe fruits
3	Neem	<i>Azadirachta indica</i> A. Juss.	Meliaceae	Goddess Sheetala Mata	Bark extracts, leaves and seeds shows antifungal and antibacterial properties and used in pimples, rheumatism, ringworm, wounds and cuts.

4	Tulsi	<i>Ocimum tenuiflorum</i> L.	Lamiaceae	Goddess <i>Lakshmi</i>	Leave are used in toothache with common salt and also used in fever and cold.
5	Anvala	<i>Phyllanthus emblica</i> L.	Phyllanthaceae	Lord Vishnu and Shiva	Fresh fruit juice has been taken to improve eye sight and to cure anaemia.
6	Kamal	<i>Nelumbo nucifera</i> Gaertn.	Nelumbonaceae	Goddess <i>Lakshmi</i>	Plant is used in the treatment of diarrhoea, sunstroke, blood vomiting, uterine disorders, burning sensation, cough and epistaxis.
7	Sweta Madar	<i>Calotropis gigantea</i> (L.) Dryand.	Apocynaceae	Lord Shiva	Leaves juice is used in skin affections; roots are used in old ulcers.
8	Shami	<i>Prosopis cineraria</i> (L.) Druce	Leguminosae	God Sani	Bark is used in leprosy, dysentery, bronchitis, asthma, leukoderma, hemorrhoids and also in muscle tremors.
9	Peepal	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> L.	Moraceae	Triad – Brahma, Vishnu & Mahesh (Shiva)	Moderately warm fresh leaf juice is used as the ear drop; gum diseases are prevented by root chewing.

Table 2. Sacred plants associated Religious festivals.

S.No.	Festivals	Month	Plant species	Local Name	Family
1	Sheetala Ashtami	March	<i>Azadirachta indica</i> A. Juss.	Neem	Meliaceae
2	Nimb Saptami	April	<i>Azadirachta indica</i> A. Juss.	Neem	Meliaceae
3	Vat Savitri	May–Jun.	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i> L.	Bargad	Moraceae
4	Somvari Amavasya	In all Amavasya (New Moon)	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> L.	Peepal	Moraceae
5	Amla Navmi (Akshay Navmi)	Oct.–Nov.	<i>Phyllanthus emblica</i> L.	Anvala	Phyllanthaceae
6	Tulsi Vivah	Oct.–Nov.	<i>Ocimum tenuiflorum</i> L.	Tulsi	Lamiaceae

The Bel tree (*Aegle marmelos* (L.) Correa) is believed to be associated with Lord Shiva (Fig. 2A). The Bel tree is generally planted near to temples and garden. Its leaves and fruits are used in the worship of Lord Shiva. The traditional devotees write the name of Rama on its leaves by sandal paste and worship the Lord with them. It gives endless virtue on the devoted person. The women of the Indo-Gangetic plain worship this tree in order to get their desires fulfilled.

Many ancient beliefs centre on the Neem tree (*Azadirachta indica* A. Juss.). It is associated with Sheetala Mata (Cool one) - the goddess of smallpox. It is believed that the Sheetla Mata live in this tree. The leaves of this tree are used in the treatment of person who suffers from smallpox. He is fanned by the leafy twigs of this tree. Furthermore, the leaves are used in several methods to lessen and relieve this disease. There are many folksongs, folktales and folk proverb in which an inspiring appeal is made to the Sheetla Mata to free the patient from the smallpox.

Tulsi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum* L.) is the most holy plants growing in front of almost all Indian houses as an auspicious point of view or a symbol of peace and worshipped by women (Fig. 2B). It is worshipped as Goddess (wife of Lord Vishnu) and also known as Vishnupriya (the beloved of Vishnu). It is also considered to be an incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi. Its associated religious festival is “Tulsi Vivah” which is the ceremonial marriage of the Tulsi with Lord Vishnu. This festival is helpful in removing obstacle if delay in marriage. It is used in most of the religious ceremonies. It has great medicinal value to mankind. Its leaves give relief in stress and cold. It enhances the concentration power of the person and also sharpens the memory. Besides, its leaves are often kept in water for purification. Tulsi plant enriches atmosphere through its divine fragrance and purifies air (Kumari & Charantimat 2011). Hence, it is known as Miracle or Queen of Herbs.



Figure 2. Some sacred plants: **A**, *Aegle marmelos* (L.) Correa; **B**, *Ocimum tenuiflorum* L.; **C**, *Ficus religiosa* L.; **D**, *Musa balbisiana* Colla; **E**, *Phyllanthus emblica* L.; **F**, *Prosopis cineraria* (L.) Druc; **G**, *Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn.; **H**, *Calotropis gigantea* (L.) Dryand.; **I**, *Ficus benghalensis* L.

Peepal (*Ficus religiosa* L.) is the most sacred tree in India (Fig. 2C). It is believed as the residence place of the triad ~Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (Shiva). Its roots, trunk and leaves represent Lord Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (Shiva), respectively. Worshipping the Peepal tree helps in controlling the thoughts, removes obstacles in marriage and financial growth and brings multiple source of income to the believer as well as good for children and fertility. According to astrological point of view, it is believed that if a person has manglik dosh, marrying a Peepal tree, removes the dosh and a person can marry a non-manglik person. The women worship this tree on the 15th of all months which falls on Monday, *i.e.* Somvari Amavasya. They pour water and milk on it roots. The sandal paste, vermilion, akshat (wet rice) and flowers are also offered to Peepal tree. They tie thread round the trunk of Peepal tree 108 times. It is ancient belief that these threads bother the tree spirit, which consequently grants the boon to worshiper.

Banana tree (*Musa balbisiana* Colla) is a very pious tree and represents Lord Brihaspati and Vishnu (Fig. 2D). It is worshiped on Thursdays to get the benefits of Jupiter. Its fruit is also offered to Lord Vishnu and Lakshmi for happy married life and financial condition. Its leaves are also used in many religious ceremonies and festivals. Its leaves are used as plates for food due to being long and broad.

Anvala (*Phyllanthus emblica* L.) is named amalak in Sanskrit (Fig. 2E). It is worshipped by women especially in the month of Kartik (October–November) with a view to be favoured with male progeny. On the ninth day of the bright half of the month of Kartik~which is known as Akshaya Navami (the immortal ninth)-a special offering is made to this tree. On this day Brahmanas are fed while sitting under the shadow of this tree. This brings unlimited punya (fortune) to the host. In absence of big trees, saplings are used for this purpose. It is also believed that eating food under the anvala tree in the month of Kartik absolves one from the Anna doshas for a year.

Shami tree (*Prosopis cineraria* (L.) Druce) is a sacred tree and deciduous in nature (Fig. 2F). It is mythological important in local communities. Shami tree represents God Sani. It is sacred to Indian culture especially by Hindus who worship it before going on a main journey and on the occasion of Dushehra festival. It is believed that Shami tree worshipping is helpful to check bad impacts of Sani. Religious Hindu women worship the tree regularly. In addition, it is mentioned as representative of all five F viz. Forest, Fiber, Fuel, Fodder and Food in ancient literature. The ancient literature also describes the importance of the medicinal value of this tree. Its bark has folkloric repute to possess anti-inflammatory, antirheumatic, tonic, and vermifuge properties. It is also used in the treatment of anxiety, asthma, bronchitis, dyspepsia, fever, dysentery, leprosy, piles, wandering of the mind, and tremors (Rani *et al.* 2013). It is well regarded by environmentalists, practitioners, farmers and villagers for inclusion in afforestation projects in extremely dry areas.

Kamal (*Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn.) is known as Indian lotus or sacred lotus (Fig. 2G). It is associated to Goddess Lakshmi. She is the Hindu Goddess of wealth, fortune and prosperity (both spiritual and material). It is used in Diwali festival and other religious occasion and has cultural significance in Hindus. All parts of the Kamal plants are edible. Its rhizomes are widely used for vegetable as well as other purposes like chips and known as Kamal Kakdi.

Sweta Madar (*Calotropis gigantea* (L.) Dryand.) is a sacred plant and associated to Lord Shiva (Fig. 2H). It can be found in most of the Hindu houses. The leaves of Sweta Madar warmed in oil applied in inflammatory part of the body. It is also used by the people who are suffering from rheumatism.

The Bargad tree (*Ficus benghalensis* L.) symbolizes Lord Shiva (Fig. 2I). It also depicts the Trimurti – Brahma (roots), Vishnu (bark), and Shiva (leaves). Additionally, it represents life and fertility in Indian cultures. According to Hindu calendar, the Amavashya of the Hindi month Jyeshtha (May-June) is called as Vat Savitri Amavashya or Bargadahi Amavashya. Married women offer their worship to this tree and tying raw cotton thread around the tree on Amavashya of Hindi month Jyeshtha to celebrate ‘Vat Savitri’. This brings unlimited and continued good fortunes on this day to the worshipper. This tree is reported extensively in ancient Indian medicine systems for various diseases. Several parts of this tree were used to cure many deadly diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery, diabetes, menorrhagia, leucorrhoea, nervous disorders, tonic and astringent (Gopukumar & Praseetha 2015). It is also considered as India’s National Tree and denotes spiritual knowledge. The Bargad tree is often being planted around temples and a place of religious importance.

Thus, the above results and discussion proved the relation of human and the nature towards plants conservation. The traditional worshipping has protected many plants which have tremendous medicinal value and made them as sacred, so that with the fear of deity nobody eradicates it. So we have to protect these sacred plants for us and our next generation for better survival. On the basis of this study, we have to follow our ancestor’s belief for human and nature sustainability.

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