

PLANTS : TRADITIONAL WORSHIPPING

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(Received 12 April 1982; after revision 10 August 1982)

Plants occupy an important place in mythology. Every nation has its own set of sacred plants. This article attempts to highlight the importance of some plants known to be traditionally worshipped in different parts of India. Significance of these plants in different ceremonies and their role in festivals have been discussed.

In the symbolism of the most ancient nations, sacred trees sometimes figured as a type of the universe representing the whole system of created things but more frequently as a tree of life¹⁻⁵. According to the Jewish tradition, 'The tree of Life' was a date palm, which figured on an Egyptian sculptural tablet of the fifteenth century B.C. and preserved in the museum of Berlin. 'Etzar', a species of citrus is also mentioned in the sacred scriptures of the Jews. Israelites used to carry about a branch of this tree in the feast of the *Tabernacles*. All the eastern literature is full of stories told under the fig tree. In the Chinese as well as in the Japanese mythology, the 'World tree' supported the universe whose fruits were partaken by gods or men. Indian mythology records a plant *kalpavrkṣa*, i.e. a tree fulfilling all human desires. In Southern India, coconut plant is also known as *kalpavrkṣa*. Coconut fruit is offered as 'tambulum' along with betel leaves and areca nuts. Even in *pūrṇakumbha*, a coconut is part of the *kalasa*. Every part of this tree is useful and its fruits are used in many ceremonies throughout India.

In India, tree worshipping became quite common in the third or fourth millenium B.C., when there was a highly evolved Harappan culture. Among the seals of Mohenjodaro also, one seal depicted a stylised *pipal* (*Ficus religiosa*) tree with two heads of unicorns emerging from its stem. Painted pottery of the Indus valley often included palms and *pipal* trees. Tree worshipping occupied a very important place during the vedic period also. The presiding deity of the trees was the great Lord *Soma*. Importance of the trees during the *Rgveda* period could be seen in the hymns:

'May plants, the water and the sky
Preserve us and woods and mountains
With their trees for tresses'

(*Rgveda* V. 41.11)

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The injunctions against cutting trees was so strict that *Rāvaṇa* (a character in epic *Rāmāyaṇa*) was reported to have said, "I have not cut down a fig tree in the month of *Vaiśākha*, why then does the country befall me?" It is recorded in epics that even during the reign of *Rāvaṇa*, planting of trees was considered to be a laudable objective. No trees with fruit or blossoms could be cut down as the cutter would be threatened with destruction of his family. In the *Purāṇas*, the great epics, the herbs that cured the diseases were presumed to have divine qualities. This led to the worship of trees in India.

In many *vratas* observed by Hindu females such as, *Dūrvāṣṭamī*, *Aśokāṣṭamī* and *Madanotsapa* trees are worshipped. The most important occasion of tree worship is during *Durgā Pūjā*. Alongwith goddess *Durgā*, nine branches with nine leaves (such as *Mangifera* sp., *Sarcococa* sp., *Cynodon* sp., *Ficus* sp. and *Aegle marmelos*) are worshipped with the chanting of *mantras*. In a number of regions of India, certain trees are still worshipped as deities by the tribals of pre-australoid stock. Certain plants, flowers and leaves are offered daily in the worship of God.

In Northern India, sugarcane, ten days old barley plants and some flowers such as cotton are worshipped on *Dussehra* day. *Pipal* (*Ficus religiosa*), *nīm* (*Azadirachta indica*) and *bar* (*Ficus benghalensis*) planted at one place (Triveni) are worshipped in Northern India. The Naga people are great worshippers of the trees. The two names *pallava* and *kadamba* are symbolic of tree worshipping in Southern India. *Pallava* are the leaves of the trees and *kadamba* (*Anthocephalus indicus*), a very sacred tree in Hindu mythology. *Pipal* and *nīm* trees are grown together in Mysore. The *pipal* is regarded as the symbol of male and the *nīm* as the female. A ceremonial 'marriage' of these trees is performed. The tropical luxuriance of Southern India is reflected in the profusion of images which adorn the *Gupurams* of the temples in South Indian sculptures of the thirteenth century onwards.

It is believed that Indian fig (*Ficus benghalensis*) tree on the eastern side of the house, *pipal* (*Ficus religiosa*) in the south, coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) in the east or north-east is always auspicious. Mango (*Mangifera indica*) tree is auspicious at every place and if situated on the east, gives wealth. There are very few ceremonies of the Hindus which can be completed without the help of the trees. Religious importance of trees can be very well seen from the birth to the marriage of a Hindu. *Kuśa* (*Desmostachya bipinnata*) grass, neem and bamboo wood play an important role in the last rites of man. While reciting *Gayatrī mantras* the devotee holds *kuśa* grass in his left hand and three blades of same grass in his right hand. The *argha* consists of *tila* (*Sesamum indicum*) flowers, barley water and red sandal wood.

The following is the list of plants either worshipped as deities themselves or offered to gods during rituals:

Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*), the most sacred plant in the Hindu religion is consequently

found in or near almost every Hindu house throughout India. According to poets, it protects from misfortune and sanctifies and guides to heaven all who cultivate it. The brahmins hold it sacred to the gods Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu. The plant is the transformed nymph *Tulasī*, beloved of Kṛṣṇa. In the *Vratakaumudī*, one of the sacred books of the Hindus, a ceremony called the *Tulasīhākṣavrata* is ordered to be performed when a vow is made which consists of offering one lakh leaves one by one to Sri Kṛṣṇa, the performer fasting till the ceremony is complete. The leaves are also used in the funeral ceremonies of the Hindus.

Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) is believed to be inhabited by the sacred triad Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. It is used at the investiture and at the laying of the foundation of a building. Vows are made to it and it is worshipped and never cut down by the Hindus. Male offspring is entreated if under its shade pious women move around its trunk 108 times. The branches represent Lord Mahādeva, in the bark presides the Ganges and the leaves are considered to be minor deities. Indigenous to the Gangetic basin, *pipal* is held in great veneration both by Hindus and Buddhists alike throughout the country. It is the well known 'Bodhi' tree—the tree of wisdom under which Gautama sat for meditation for 49 days and received light, thereafter emerged as the Buddha, 'the enlightened one'. The Bodhi tree has been replanted from its own seed and perpetuated at Bodh Gaya in Bihar for the last 2500 years. According to Buddhist literature it was again under the Bodhi tree that Lord Buddha partook milk and rice offered by Sujātā, a lovely maiden of the locality and thus broke his fast. Dakṣinamūrti, the south facing God, known as the *guru* of *gurus* and a great teacher, to master desire and time, was reportedly seated under this *pipal* tree.

According to Hindu mythology, *Brahmā* was transformed into a *Bar tree*. *Bar* or *Banyan tree* (*Ficus benghalensis*) is viewed as the male to the *pipal*. It is regarded as a sin to destroy either of these trees but more specially the males. It is good to plant a young male close to the female and this is done with a ceremony somewhat similar to marriage. It is customary to place a piece of silver coin under the young *Banyan tree*. The dry twigs are used as *samidhas* for producing sacred fire, the leaves are employed as one of the *pañca pallavas* or platters and also for pouring libations. In the *vratarāg*, females are asked to worship this tree on *Fesht śudh* (15th May), to water it, and to wind a thread round it and to worship it with *gandhu* (*Artemisia maritima*) flowers and the Indian marigold. It is further suggested to make *parikramās* or *pradakṣiṇas* (i.e. to go round it a certain number of times) to praise the *banyan tree* and to pray to it for the longevity of their husbands and for fulfilment of their wishes. Women are exhorted that by worshipping this tree they attain one of the heavens, *Śivaloka*. They are often encouraged to this worship citing the example of *Sāvitrī*, the wife of *Satyavān* who brought back to life her deceased husband through the adoration of this tree. The umbrella poles often used at ceremonies are made of the wood, the aerial roots and the young thin roots are used by the *Santhals* and other aboriginal tribes of Nagpur. It is a symbol of prosperity, grandeur, stabi-

lity, unity in diversity and so on. Species of *Ficus* held an important place in the mythology and religious life of ancient people of both East and West. In this regard the holy *pipal* tree, the banyan tree and the *gular* fig (udumbare) are recognised since the Vedic period whereas the fig holds much of the same place in the mythology of the west. *Bar* is supposed to be the abode of *yakṣa* and *yakṣmī*. In ancient times, the Hindu male used to go to the banyan tree in the morning and pray to *yakṣa* for the good health of his children.

Aśoka (*Saraca indica*), is considered to be one of the most sacred trees of the Hindus. People worship it on the thirteenth day of the month *Chaitra*. The tree is the symbol of love and is dedicated to god *Kāma*. The word *Aśoka* signifies deprivation of grief. The tree is held sacred among the Burmans also because under it Gautama Buddha was born.

Palāśa tree (*Butea monosperma*) is sacred to the moon and is said to have sprung from the feather of a falcon imbued with the *Soma* (intoxicating drink made from different plants). It is employed in Hindu ceremonies connected with the blessing of calves to ensure their providing good milkers. The wood is used in the sacrifice and is frequently mentioned in the Vedas. The leaves are trifoliate, the middle leaflet is supposed to represent *Viṣṇu*, the left *Brahmā* and the right *Śiva*. The red flowers of the tree are offered to gods.

Bakula (*Mimusops elangi*) has an important place in religious texts as well as in ancient Sanskrit literature. Its fragrant flowers are celebrated in the *Purāṇas* and even placed amongst the flowers of the Hindu paradise. *Ṛṣṇa* is said to have fascinated the milkmaids of *Brīndāvana* on the banks of river *Yamunā* by wearing a garland of *Mimusops* flowers. *Bakula* is recorded as a flowering tree growing in the *Gandhamadana* forest in *Rāmāyaṇa* and was also among the trees planted near *Indraprastha* in *Mahābhārata*. *Kālidāsa* included in his classical Sanskrit literature *Bakula* flowers as a symbol of love and beauty. He had beautifully described in *Raghuvamśa*, that the odour of the flowers of *Bakula* somewhat resembled that of a wine, and the fragrance of the flowers was often linked to that of breath of young women. It is supposed that the tree puts forth maximum efflorescence, if a mouthful of wine is sprinkled on it by a young damsel. The tree is also sacred to god *Śiva*.

Banana plant (*Musa* spp.) has special significance as it is ordered in *Vrataraja* that females should worship on the fourth of the *Kārtik Śudh* whereby their husbands would survive them and their life would be lengthened. It is also worshipped on the third day of *Śrāvana*. The bunches of fruits are much used in entrances of houses and on such occasions, specially at marriages, the banana plant with its fruit and inflorescence are known to signify life of plenty and fertility. The plantain called *kāṣhāli* is considered sacred in Madras and is reserved as an offering to the gods. It is used especially in the worship of god *Srī Satyanārāyaṇa*.

Mango (*Mangifera indica*) is inextricably connected with many of the Hindu mythological legends and folklore. The mango in Sanskrit is called *āmra*, *cuta* and *sahakāra*, and is said to be a transformation of *Prajāpati* (Lord of Creatures), an epithet in the Veda originally applied to Sāvitrī, Soma, Tvaṣṭrī, Indra and *Agni* (Fire), but afterwards as the home of a separate god presiding over procreation. The tree provides one of the *pañca pallava* or aggregate of five shrubs used in Śiva worship on the *Sivarātri* day. It is also a favourite among Indian poets. The flower is invoked in the sixth act of *Śakuntalā*, as one of the five arrows of Kāmadeva. In the travels of Buddhist pilgrims Fa-hian and Sungyūm, a mangrove (*āmraavana*) is mentioned which was presented by *āmradarikā* to Buddha to be used as a place of repose. *Āmradarikā* was the daughter of a mango tree.

The Indian Coral or *Pañgra* tree (*Erythrina* sp.) is supposed to flower in Indra's garden. An episode in the *Purāna* relates the quarrel of Rukminī and Satyabhāmā for the possession of the flowers which Lord Kṣṛṇa had stolen from the garden. The leaf is supposed to represent the Hindu *Trimūrti* of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva.

Candana (*Santalum album*) wood enters largely into the religious ceremonies of the Hindus. Idols are carved out of the wood. A paste derived out of the wood is given as an offering to the gods and an incense made of sandalwood shavings is burnt before them. Large quantities are used by the Parsis also in their fire temples. Rich natives sometimes employ sandalwood for cremating their dead relatives, and all, both rich and poor, add at least one piece of the wood as a token to the funeral pyre.

Rudrākṣa (*Eleaecarpus ganitrus*) nuts-five grooved and elegantly tubercled are worn as a necklace by the followers of Śiva in order to gain his graces. They are also supposed to preserve health. Considerable importance is attached to the number of the facets on the nuts.

Putrañjīva (*Putrañjīva roxburghii*) fruit stones are strung together to form rosaries by Hindu *fakirs*, brahmins and by parents to put around the neck of their children. These are supposed to protect the wearer from harm, hence the Sanskrit name, which signifies the life of a child (*putra*=son; *jīva*=longevity).

Other plants

Brahmā is believed to be seated on the Lotus (*Nymphaea* sp.) sprung from the navel of Viṣṇu. The *śāla* (*Shorea robusta*) trees are associated with the birth of Buddha. It is said that he died in the grove of *śāla* trees. It is because of these associations that this tree is the most sacred to Buddhists. *Bel* tree is also supposed to be very sacred. The leaves of the tree are offered to Lord Śiva for worship. Saints or sinners, philanthropists or thieves, high born or low born are supposed to be saved by the *bilva* (*Aegle marmelos*) leaves, given in devotion to Lord Śiva. *Campā* (*Michelia*

champaca) tree is frequently cultivated near temples where it meets the demands for flowers and offering to the gods. Bamboo tree is also supposed to be very auspicious. It can be very well seen as poles in marriages.

The study of trees mentioned in holy scriptures of different nations is a fascinating subject. Mythological significance of these trees is certainly not without reason and relevance though this relevance might have undergone a number of transformations over the centuries. As old civilizations give place to new, many ideas and ideologies change. But in the case of plant life and its myriad forms few have been chosen for prominence in religious observances and they seem to have survived over the centuries and are still looked upon with awe and reverence.

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