



Importance of Some Sacred Plants In India With Reference To Vedas : A Modern Perspective

Dr. J. Radha Krishna

Department of Environmental Sciences, National Sanskrit University, Tirupati

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Abstract : Tree worship was a result of man's natural reverence for a creation of nature that provided food, shelter, fodder, timber, and so much more. Tree worship is inherent in all the religions emanating from India. These SGs have been conserving the biodiversity for many decades. But, nowadays, the attitude of people has changed and this along with the mistrust of traditional beliefs has caused degradation of sacred groves all over India. In the present context for natural conservation of sacred & medicinal plants to provide incentives to local people participation for the same and also necessary action to preserved sacred groves of the forests conserved by indigenous people.

Keywords : Palas Tree, Neem Tree, Bilva, Peepal Tree, Tulsi, Air, Soil, Water.

INTRODUCTION : Vedas are the oldest sacred scriptures found in the Hindu religion. Vedas means knowledge, and the Vedas contain immense knowledge. In the Hindu religion, plants have particular importance as they are perceived as sacred and worshipped to date. Vedas are the earliest Sanskrit texts of India's classical spiritual culture and carry the essence of its civilization. They are four in number. Rig-Veda, Yajurveda and Samveda are collectively known as Vedatrayi. Atharva Veda is considered as a later addition. Vedic literature is spiritual as well as scientific in its nature and tends to reflect the worldview. Vedic literature is spiritual as well as scientific in its nature and tends to reflect the worldview, preoccupations and social values of the people of ancient India. The history of this literature is one of the longest of all and one of the most amply documented. Veda is the foundation of dharma. The Vedas deal with some trees, birds, animals, the earth, the water, the air, the climate, the fire, the flowers, the herbs and the plants in the Vedic hymns. It is interesting to note that the Vedas mention a huge number of herbs and plants in connection with the performance of sacrifices. Sacred plants are distributed across the globe, and diverse cultures recognize them in different ways encoding various rules for their protection. Sacred groves occur in many parts of India viz., Western Ghats, Central India, northeast India, etc particularly where the indigenous communities live. The sacred plants of India are actually worshipped throughout the nation owing only to its mythological significance. In India various god and goddess are worshipped in Hindu religion throughout

India. Plants flowers and leaves are used during worship for pushpa-puja and patra-puja. An attempt has been made to identify folklore medicinally important plants frequently used by rural communities of sacred groves and its environment.

SACRED PLANTS IN VEDIC PERIOD : Sacred trees form an important part of the ecological heritage of India. Most temples, towns, and villages are associated with trees. Some plants are sacred to the individual deity; others, to the place. Sometimes, the tree is an integral or even larger part of the sanctity of the shrine; towns, cities and dynasties have been named after sacred trees. Worship of plants is an ancient phenomenon in India, probably the oldest form of worship. Sanctification of plants reveals the socioeconomic and health concerns of the ancient peoples, their knowledge of environment and its conservation. Association of a single tree with a sacred sthala or sthan is reflected in the chaitya vriksha and sthala vriksha (explained below) of literature and society. The earliest temples were little more than icons placed under trees. Plant worship is probably the oldest form of religion, because of the sheer magnificence and antiquity of huge trees. The Rg Veda (X.97) says that plants are 'those that grew in old times much earlier than even the shining ones (devas)... and are different from many different places ...' Trees were called vanaspati (lord of the forest) and invoked as deities along with the waters and mountains. The Rg Veda (X.146) invokes the forest as Aranyani, a jungle deity. The plants of the Rg Veda situate the Veda in the sub-tropical plains of India and Pakistan. Soma is the most important plant in the Rg Veda. Mandala IX of the Rg Veda is called the Soma mandala, devoted to the ritual of Soma pavamana or 'purification of Soma', and six hymns in other mandalas are devoted to its praise. Soma was a ritual drink extracted from a plant. Where did the Soma plant grow? According to the Mahabharata, it grew on Mujavant, a mountain located in the Himalayas. The plant had long stalks and was yellow in colour. In the Vedic period, all of nature was, in some sense, divine, part of an indivisible life force uniting the world of humans, animals, and vegetables. Besides trees, grasses and herbs were also held sacred. Trees, says the Rg Veda, are the homes and mansions of the gods. Varuna is the root of the Tree of Life, the source of all creation, a great yaksha reclining in tapas (meditation) on the waters from where a tree springs from his navel (Atharva Veda). In the Yajur Veda, this quality is inherited by Prajapati. The tree is the asvatta but later the Creator was seated on the lotus, which issued from Narayana's navel. The pipal was held in great esteem in the Vedic period. A tree of huge dimensions, it was symbolic of the cosmos and even of the Brahman. The imperishable pipal was later called the akshaya vata, the eternal tree. The pipal tree was the basis of a profound metaphysical doctrine in the Rg Vedic and later Vedic literature. The Rg Veda says that plants personify the divine and trees are the Vanaspati or lords of the forest, self-regenerating and eternal.

SOME IMPORTANT SACRED PLANTS : The Sacred plants play an important role in ensuring smooth ecosystem services such as clean environment, that is, air, soil, and water conservation, flora and fauna conservation, carbon sequestration, temperature control, and conservation of traditional knowledge. They are, therefore, of central importance as far as the ecological conservation and policy regarding conservation and management of forest at state and national levels are concerned. Sacred groves serve as a home for birds and mammals, and hence they indirectly help in the conservation of biodiversity.

Tulsi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum* L.): It belongs to Lamiaceae Family. The most sacred plant mentioned in the Vedas is the Holy Basil, commonly known as Tulsi in India. Every religious event and ritual is pronounced

with the leaves of Holy Basil, which is why Holy Basil is found in every Indian household and considered as a symbol of purity. 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. Hence, it is known as Miracle or Queen of Herbs.

Peepal Tree (*Ficus religiosa* L.): It belongs to Moraceae Family. Peepal tree is the most sacred tree in India. 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 its 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.

Bilva (*Aegle marmelos* L.): It belongs to Rutaceae Family. Plant is generally cultivated near to temples and cherishes this tree and it is sacrilege to cut it down. The tree is sacred to the trimurti (a representative of Shiva) and Parvati (wife of Lord Shiva). The leaves are used in enchantments and twigs are used for sacred fire during Samidhas. Leaves and fruits are used in the worship of Lord Shiva. Medicinal value: Fruits fleshy part is dried, powdered and given/used to children as anastigmatic for diarrhoea while Fruits pulp used for stomach ache. Juice is prepared from ripe fruit used as mild laxative. Leaves chewed and swallowed every morning help in healing stomach ulcer and also to reduced sugar of diabetes patient.

Neem Tree (*Azadirachta indica* L.): It belongs to Meliaceae family. The tree is held sacred by the Hindus and used in many religious ceremonies. It is said that when nectar was being taken to heaven from the world below for the use of Gods, a few drops fell on the neem. Thus on New Year days of Shak Samvat, Hindus eat its leaves in the hopes that they will acquire freedom from disease. Seeds oil used for manufacturing soap like margosa. Neem oil cake used as repellent for termites. Plant twigs are used to clean the teeth and in toothache. Water boiled along with leaves used for washing eyes and skin diseases.

Palas Tree (*Butea monosperma* Lam.): It belongs to Fabaceae family. This beautiful tree is sacred to Soma (Moon). The flowers are offered to Gods mentioned in the Vedas that at the time of Samidhas, the dry twigs are used in the ceremonies which goes under the name of nava grahas (i.e. celebrated to secure the pacification of the nine planets), also on the occasion of Vastu shanti (i.e. entrance into a newly built house). The flowers are used for making a dye used during Holi and Rang panchmi. The bark and seeds are given for snake bite as antidote. Leaves powder is given with honey to children for curing ring worm.

Amla (*Phyllanthus emblica* L.): It belongs to Euphorbiaceae family. The Amla is worshipped by the women folk on Amla navmi in the month of Kartik Shukla Navmi and also worshipped as Akshay Navmi. Kartik Mahatma orders to worship the tree and a Brahmin couple should feed under it whereby all their sins are washed, in Vrat Kaumudi, the Vrat (Fast) and worship of the tree are ordered. Medicinal Value: Powdered fruits of *Phyllanthus emblica*, *Terminalia chebula* and *Terminalia bellirica* are taken in equal proportion (known as 'triphala') with warm water or milk acts as a mild laxative. Triphala soaked in water and used for washing eyes.

CONSERVATION OF PLANTS IN VEDIC PERIOD : Some plants mentioned in Vedic literature are known with the same name even today and are under continuous utility since that period. Their therapeutic values are boundless and amazing. As all these plants are native to our country they are available readily in our near vicinity. Many plants have been mentioned in the Vedic literature. Various ancient written records, in the form of manuscripts, are available in Sanskrit and several other Indian languages. Sanskrit literature includes the Vedas, the Upanisada and epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The common literature available includes prose, poetry and drama of a number of Sanskrit authors like Kalidasa, Magha and Bhavabhuti, in whose works the information on plants is incidental and given by way of comparison. Technical literature on medicinal plants with complete detail of morphology and pharmacology is described in the works like the Caraka-Samhita and Susruta Samhita. A lot of indications of morphology of plants are traced in the Vedic literature. In the Taittirīyasaṁhitā, the parts of plants are eulogized viz. root (mūla), shoot (tūla), stem (kāṇḍa), twig (valśa), branch (śākhā), leaf (pāṇa), flower (puspa) and fruit (phala). The Vājasaneyīsamhitā and the Atharvaveda also mention about the physiology of plants. According to the Vājasaneyīsamhitā, yajña is performed for improving the roots, branches of forest trees, flowers, fruits and herbs. The Rgveda classifies the plants in the following heads viz. Fruitful (phalinah), blossoming (puṣpavatī), having flowers (prasuvāriḥ), grass (tṛṇa) etc. The Atharvaveda also mentions various classifications of plants. In one mantra of this Veda, the following classification is found – those rich in flowers (puspavatī), those rich in shoots (prasūmatī), those rich in fruits (phalini) and those lacking fruits (aphalā). Another classification of tree is also seen in this Veda. The same Veda again classifies trees as those that are expand (prastratīḥ), those that are bushy (stambiniḥ), those having only one sheath (ekasūnagaḥ), those that creep (pratānavatīḥ), those having many stalks (anagumatīḥ), are knotty or joined (kāṇḍiniḥ) or those that have spreading branches (viśākhāḥ). In another place of the Atharvaveda, a special classification of trees are made on the basis of colour of trees like brown (babru), white (śukra), red (rohini), spotted (pṛṣṇi), black (kṛṣṇa), swarthy (asiknī). Besides these, some other special classifications of plants are also made in the Vedas. These are the forest tree (vanaspati), fruit tree with conspicuous flowers (vānaspati or vṛkṣa), the herb (osadhi) and plant (vīrudha).

CONCLUSION: Tree worship was a result of man's natural reverence for a creation of nature that provided food, shelter, fodder, timber, and so much more. Their utility elevated trees into objects of worship. Tree worship is inherent in all the religions emanating from India. Literature, temples, and art forms-all show the worship of trees. Trees were more than ordinary creations. They represented life itself. India has a very high number of sacred groves that play an important role in biodiversity conservation because of various myths and religious beliefs associated with them. These SGs have been conserving the biodiversity for many decades. But, nowadays, the attitude of people has changed and this along with the mistrust of traditional beliefs has

caused degradation of sacred groves all over India. For improving their degraded condition, it is suggested that the local people living inside and around the SGs need to be taken into confidence, so that long-term conservation goals can be achieved. Women particularly, in both rural and urban areas, have developed faith in the number of plants by protection of the sacred plant species. In the present context for natural conservation of sacred & medicinal plants to provide incentives to local people participation for the same and also necessary action to preserved sacred groves of the forests conserved by indigenous people.

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