

Review Article

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Sacred Trees of India: Traditional Approach towards Plant Conservation

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ABSTRACT

Mountains, rivers, animals, plants, rocks, planets and even stars are considered divine. Trees being nature's major processors of solar energy which is vital for our existence, and yielding flowers, fruit, wood or medicine, have been worshiped by the Hindus as a matter of gratitude. Plants are truly a gift by god to the mankind; human beings recognized their dependence on plants at the very beginning of their life on the planet. Plants are often connected with the culture since ancient times, trees do not just have religious value but also various other values associated with them. The man's physical environment is dominated by the trees and plants. Plants and trees are considered dear to the gods and planting plants is considered as a ritual of worship, according to the mythologies, planting trees can help people lead better life with the grace of Devas. Buddhism has very close relation with the plants, it is the duty of people to preserve plants considering them as living being. A Buddhist monk never cuts down a tree, as the trees have life in them and they believe that it is an abode of the deity. The Jains consider plants to be important parts of the human existence, all 24 Jain tirthankaras meditated under the trees to attain enlightenment, they have a perception of livingness for the whole universe, plants and trees possess same soul as human beings. Islam also encouraged to plant trees and warned about cutting them down for instance – 'Whoever plants a tree and patiently maintains it and tends to it until its fruition, every single fruit consumed from that tree is regarded by Allah as charity. Holy Bible says "God made the trees with seed-bearing fruit. He gave us the possibility to increase their number by planting the seeds. We needed to learn to do this to continue receiving their benefits." Each religion of India considers the trees important, given are the sacred trees of various religions of India.

Keywords

Sacred Trees, Plans conservation, Hindus, Buddhism, Bible

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Introduction

By studying ancient Indian society, it is found that ancient Indian society had very close relation with environment. Our forefathers passed their life in the forests they related trees with religious and nature. 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 and Badoni 2009, Mehra *et al.*, 2014, Kumaran and Citarasu 2015, Truyen *et al.*, 2015, Bajpai *et al.*, 2016). Our ancestors knew the importance of trees and used them as a source of medicine. 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. Many people took birth on Indian soil in ancient time who wrote many literatures on naturopathy. Charak wrote a book named, 'Charaka Samghita'. Susrut and Dhanvantari also had deep knowledge of naturopathy. Our ancestors were close to the nature; therefore, they developed their daily practices according to the nature and natural laws. They were more nature protecting than we, the modern men. Many religious practices were directly related with environment.

Trees are significant in many of the world's mythologies and religions, and have been given deep and sacred meanings throughout the ages. Human beings, observing the growth and death of trees, and the annual death and revival of their foliage, have often seen them as powerful symbols of growth, death and rebirth. Evergreen trees, which largely stay green

throughout these cycles, are sometimes considered symbols of the eternal, immortality or fertility. The image of the Tree of life or world tree occurs in many mythologies.

Indian tradition of tree worshipping

Sacred or symbolic trees include the banyan and the sacred (*Ficus religiosa*) in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil of Judaism and Christianity. In folk religion and folklore, trees are often said to be the homes of tree spirits. Germanic mythology as well as Celtic polytheism both appear to have involved cultic practice in sacred groves, especially grove of oak. The term druid itself possibly derives from the Celtic word for oak. The Egyptian Book of the Dead mentions sycamores as part of the scenery where the soul of the deceased finds blissful repose.

Indians have been worshipping trees since time immemorial and this is done as a matter of gratitude because we know that life cannot exist without trees. In Indian culture trees are believed to have conscious like humans so they can feel pain as well as happiness like us. So trees and their products are part of our rituals and ceremonies. With passage of time different trees like neem (*Azadirachta indica*), banyan (*Ficus bengalensis*), bel (*Aegle marmelos*) and many more have been added to the religious sanctity. Even various Gods and Goddess have been associated with different trees like bel, rudraksa (seeds of *Elaeocarpus*) are close to Lord Shiva, peepal to Lord Vishnu, mango (*Mangifera indica*) to Lord Hanuman, asoka to Kamadeva, etc.

Trees being nature's major processors of solar energy which is vital for our existence, and yielding flowers, fruit, wood or medicine, have been worshipped by the Hindus as a matter of gratitude.

Table.1 Description and uses of important sacred trees

Sl. No.	Tree species	Description
1	Peepal Tree (<i>Ficus religiosa</i>) (Bodhi Tree of Enlightenment)	The most worshipped tree in India which in Sanskrit is known as “Ashvattha”. Peepal tree is also known as Bodhi tree or tree of enlightenment as it is believed that Buddha attained enlightenment under peepal tree. This is the reason why Peepal tree is sacred to Buddhist. Also the present Kali Yuga began with the death of Lord Krishna that had happened under this tree only. In Hinduism it is believed that roots of Peepal tree are Brahma, the trunk is Vishnu and the leaves are Shiva. A red thread or cloth is tied around Peepal tree for worship so cutting down Peepal tree is considered inauspicious.
2	Banyan (<i>Ficus bengalensis</i>) (Tree of Life)	It is believed that three gods – Lord Vishnu, Lord Shiva and Lord Brahma are symbolized by the Banyan tree. Mostly the childless couple worship banyan tree and it is supposed not to be cut. In most of the Hindu cultures, this tree represents life and fertility.
3	Bel (<i>Aegle marmelos</i>) (A Medicinal Tree)	Bel is another very auspicious and sacred tree in India that is supposed to be associated with Lord Shiva. To please Lord Shiva, leaves of Bel tree are offered to Him and thus known as bilva. Bel leaves are trifoliate or tripatra and it is believed that it symbolizes three work of Lord – the preservation, creation and destruction as well as three eyes of the Lord. So during the worship of Lord Shiva offering Bel leaves is compulsory.
4	Ashoka Tree (<i>Saraca indica</i>) (A Guard Against Grief)	Ashoka is one of the most sacred and well-known trees of India. In Sanskrit, Ashoka means without grief or the one who gives no grief. As per Hinduism, Kama Deva (Lord of Love) is associated with Ashoka tree. Even Sita Devi was kept by Ravana in Asoka Vatika.
5	Mango Tree (<i>Mangifera indica</i>) (Icon of Love and Fertility)	Mango tree is another very sacred tree in India whose leaves, wood as well as fruits are used in many rituals. To mark any auspicious occasion, string made from mango leaves is hung on the entrance. Mango leaves are kept in the pot with coconut during Kalash Sathapana. Blossoms of Mango tree are offered to Goddess Saraswati on Basant Panchami. Mango tree is also very auspicious for Buddhists as it is believed that Lord Buddha had created a huge mango tree at Shravasti from the seed.
6	Neem Tree (<i>Azadirachta indica</i>)	Many medical benefits are associated with neem tree and because of this it is highly respected in India. It

	(A Tree of Healing)	supposed to be an expression of Goddess Durga. In Bengal, the tree is believed to be a place of living of ‘Sitala’ the great Pox-mother who can cause and cure disease. To cure pox, neem leaves are rubbed on the body and by offering a prayer to her. It is also believed that smoke produced by burning neem leaves keep the evil spirits away from you and your home. Mahatma Gandhi was a great believer in neem.
7	Banana Tree (<i>Musa paradisiaca</i>) (The Resourceful Tree)	It is really a very auspicious tree in India. Its every part is used in performing one or the other ritual. Like welcoming gates are made by using trunk, leaves are used to distribute Prasad, fruit is offered to Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi. Banana tree is also worshipped in Kadali Vrata. Banana tree with flowers and fruits is worshipped for the welfare of the family.
8	Coconut Tree (<i>Cocos nucifera</i>) (Ceremonial Food)	Coconut tree, especially in South India is one of the most sacred trees and must for a family to plant it at home. Coconut is used while performing all the Hindu rituals and offered in all kinds of pujas. Even before any puja, sthapana with water filled pot, mango leaves and coconut is done. It actually symbolizes Goddess Lakshmi. It is considered that three black marks on coconut shell are the three eyes of Lord Shiva.
9	Sandal wood Tree (<i>Santalum album</i>) (Sacred Incense)	For worshipping Gods, paste and oil of sandal wood tree are used. Sandal wood imparts fragrance to everything even to the axe that is used to cut this tree. So anything that is just excellent is known as chandana. Holy places are purified with chandan.
10	Kadamb Tree (<i>Anthocephalus cadamba</i>)	It is the tree of Lord Krishna as he used to play his flute under this tree. His childhood activities like jumping in Yamuna, dancing with gopis, climbing on the trees were all done on or around Kadamb tree. So flowers of Kadamb tree are offered at various temples.
11	Tulsi (<i>Ocimum Sanctum</i>)	Tulsi is one of the most common sacred plants of our country. Many people have tulsi’s planted in their backyards. Tulsi is always needed in religious ceremonies and is also popular for its medical applications. Tulsi is loved by Lord Vishnu and in Hinduism, tulsi vivaah is a very popular religious practice. Apart from this, yogis wear tulsi beads to purify their mind, body and soul.

Table.2 Sacred plants associated Religious festivals

Sl. 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

Manu believed that they were conscious like humans and felt pleasure and pain. Indian sages and seers eulogized asvattha or peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), gular (*Ficus glomerata*), neem (*Azadirachta indica*), bel (*Aegle marmelos*), bargad or banyan (*Ficus bengalensis*), Asoka (*Saraca indica*), amala (*Phyllanthus emblica*), Arjuna (*Terminalia arjuna*) and many other trees which acquired social and religious sanctity with the passage of time.

Bel, rudraksa (seeds of *Elaeocarpus*) and ber (*Zizyphus jujuba*) are considered dear to Lord Siva, sal (*Shorea robusta*) and pipal to Lord Visnu; kadamba (*Anthocephalus cadamba*) to Lord Krishna; mango (*Mangifera indica*) to Lord Hanuman, asoka to Kamadeva; silk cotton (*Bombax malabaricum*) to the goddess Laksmi; and coconut or sriphala (*Cocos nucifera*) to Varuna or the lord of waters, and to many other gods and goddesses.

The five trees (panca-vrksa) which adorn Lord Indra's garden (Nandana) in his paradise (Swarga) are: (1) mandara (*Erythrina stricta*) with scarlet flowers in horizontal clusters at the ends of branches; its shade relieves one of physical ailments and mental stress; (2) parijata (*Nyctanthes arbor-tristis*) with bark

of gold, leaves of copper color, and fragrant, rejuvenate fruit; it arose out of the ocean of milk and was taken away by Indra to his paradise from where it was brought to Dwaraka by Lord Krishna at the instance of his wife Satyabhama. After the passing away of the Lord and the submerging of Dwaraka in the ocean, it was taken back to heaven; (3) samtanaka, a tree of wonder having leaves which promote fertility in men; its identification remains obscure; (4) haricandana or sandalwood (*Santalum album*) well known for its fragrance and cooling effect, it keeps evil spirits at bay; and (5) kalpa vrksa or kalpa taru, the tree of eternity which emerged as a result of the churning of the ocean of milk; it was lifted to Swarga by Indra, and is frequently mentioned in Sanskrit literature for its wish-fulfilling quality.

The Pauranic lore has it that Brahma metamorphosed into a palasa, Visnu into a pipal and Rudra into a bargad after being cursed by Parvati, the wife of Lord Siva. Neem is customarily believed to be the abode of the goddess Sitala; pipal of the goddess Laksmi (on Sundays), amala of both lord Visnu and Lord Siva, and Sami (*Ficus benjamina*) of Lord Hanuman, the son of the

wind-god. Deodar (*Polylathia longifolia*) is believed to be the adopted child of Lord Siva. Pipal is said to form a link between earth and heaven. The flowers of five trees-asoka, mango, navamal lika (*Ixora parviflora*), pink lotus (*Nelumbe nucifera*) and blue lotus (*Nymphae stel-lata*) –adorn the tip of the bow of Kama, the god of love. Kadamba reminds one of Lord Krishna’s flute and bargad of Lord Siva’s matted hair which reflect in the tangled roots of the tree.

Some trees are considered sacred due to their association with prophets and holy men. The barged, for example, is sacred to Hindus because the sage Markandeya took shelter on its branches during the deluge; Lord Rama lived in a grove under five banyan trees near Nasik when he was in exile; and lord Krsna played around it during his childhood. Sala is sacred to Buddhists because Lord Buddha took birth and passed away under it; so are pipal and bargad, as the Lord meditated under them for gaining supreme realization. The trees considered sacred in the Jaina tradition were associated in some way with the Tirthankaras: bargad with Rsabha Deva, sal with Sambhavanatha and Mahavira, bel with Sitalanatha, kadamba with Vasupujya, pipal with Ananta, Asoka with Mallinatha, and bakula with Neminatha. Ber (jube) is viewed with reverence by the Sikhs because Guru Nanak Dev planted a sapling of it on the banks of the river Bein when he was at Sultanpur Lodhi. Guru Gobind Singh stayed under a jube tree in a village of Seeloana in Ludhiana district. Both the sites have been converted into shrines. The ritha tree, under which Guru Nank Dev sat during his sojourn in the Himalayas, began to bear sweet fruit, and now a shrine has come up centred around it. The ber under which Baba Buddha (1506-1621) used to sit supervising the excavation of the sacred pool at the Amritsar Golden Temple has also become an object of worship for the devotees.

Specific directions for the plantation of sacred trees are mentioned in the Vrksa Ayur-veda: bargad should be planted in the eastern side of the house; bel and peepal in the west; mango and amala in the south; Asoka in the southeast; and itti, a wave-leaved fig tree, in the north. Auspicious stars for planting them all are Swati, Hasta, Rohini, Sravana and Mula.

The day, time, month or occasion of worship of sacred trees has a mythical, astrological or utilitarian basis. Amala and pipal are worshipped especially in the month of Kartika (October-November), bel and gular in Sravana (July-August), kadamba in Asadha (June-July), Sami in Asvina (September-October), bargad in Jyestha (May-June), and so on. A number of festivals and Vratsa are also observed in their honour as per the table given at the end of this article.

Due to their ecological value and efficacious properties, trees continue to be used in the religious and social ceremonies of the Hindus. The trunk of banana is used to erect welcoming gates and its leaves to make the ceremonial pavilion. The five most sacred leaves of peepal, gular, pilkhan (*Ficus lacor*), bargad and mango-are ubiquitously employed in making prayers and offerings. On auspicious occasions, mango leaves are tied to a string and hung on doors; leaves of palasa and bargad make workable plates and bowls during community feasts. Leaves of some other trees are also customarily offered to deities of bel to lord Siva, of banana and arjuna to Lord Ganesa, and of amaltas (*Cassia fistula*) to all the gods and goddesses. The red flowers of the Indian coral tree are used in the worship of Lord Visnu and Lord Siva; of kaner (*Nerium indicum*) in the worship of Lord Siva and the Sun-god; of ketaki (*Yucca gloriosa*) in the worship of Laksmi, and of panas or breadfruit (*Artocarpus integrifolia*) in the worship of Lord Visnu.

The use of some flowers is prohibited in worship rites-of sirisa or parrot tree (*Albizia lebbbeck*, *Bahunia variegata*) in the worship of Lord Ganesa and vijaya sal (*Pterocarpus marsupium*) in the worship of Lord Siva (Wani and Mayona, 2018). Supari or areca nut which symbolizes Lord Ganesa is commonly used in various rites. Banana is offered to Lord Visnu and Laksmi on the eleventh day of the bright half of Pausa (December-January) and to the Sun god on the sixth day of the bright fortnight of Kartika (October-November). Mango and bel fruits are also included in the worship material-the former is offered to all gods, the latter especially to Lord Siva.

The wood of sacred trees like bel, bargad, sami, palas and pipal is never used as fuel as it invites the wrath of gods. But it is employed, in other ways, in sacrificial rites and ceremonies. Sandalwood is turned into paste and applied to the forehead. The wooden seat used during the sacred thread ceremony is made of mango or palasa; the brahmacarini is also made to walk with a stick of palas. During the sacred thread ceremony the brahmacarini has to perform sacrifice using pipal twigs called samit. After a person dies, twigs of bel are placed near the central pillar of the house and those of neem scattered near the corpse.

Sacred trees are invoked on special days for long life, for the expiation of sins, for averting mishaps, or for the fulfilment of a particular wish. Young girls are symbolically wedded to the peepal tree or bel fruit to avoid future widowhood. Tree trunks are tied with thread and circumambulated 108 times and adorned with vermilion and sandal-paste; earthen lamps are lighted under them-and the effect of all these is considered equal to a thousand sacrifices. The Saivites count prayers by using rosaries made of rudraksa berries.

Kautilya laid down that those who cut even

small branches or sprouts of trees yielding fruit and flowers, or providing shade in parks, places of pilgrimage, hermitages, and cremation or burial grounds should be sternly dealt with. In ancient India, people offered prayers and performed other rites to expiate themselves from the crime of harming or uprooting a holy tree. To plant a peepal, banyan or some other sacred tree at a holy place or on the roadside continues to be regarded by the Hindus as an act of virtue. He who plants and nurtures the following trees will never see hell: one each of the holy fig (peepal), margosa (neem) and banyan (bargad), ten tamarind trees and three each of wood apple, the holy bel, myrobalan and five mango trees. The Hindu religious mind was thus keen on environmental stability.

In conclusion, 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. The conclusion of the present review throws light on the culture of tree worship in India and its scientific relevance in present science era. If we see the history of Indian tradition, we find that trees were treated as God and Goddess in Indian tradition. Lot of pharmacological and environmental freshness work has been scientifically carried out on various part of traditional plants some other traditionally important the therapeutically uses are also remaining to proof till now scientifically. It can be said that in ancient era, spiritual trees were used as an environmental protection and also medicinal properties. Therefore, our ancestors protected trees. In contemporary society, human being is emphasising on economic development, therefore, they have exploited the nature and destroyed the forests.

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