

Important Sacred Medicinal Plants of Ayurveda: a review

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Abstract

Since ages , human beings are constantly interacting with the nature for their basic needs like food , fodder , shelter & fuel etc. Plants being an integral component of the nature , occupy an important position in the evolution of human race. Apart from nutritional value , a number of plants are also used as medicine. Ayurveda has mentioned a number of such medicinal plants. Hence people from various cultures started worshipping many such medicinal plants as sacred or holy . Due to their resemblance with some deity or due to their peculiar medicinal properties such plants are used in several rituals and other similar sacred practices .

Keywords

Sacred plants , Indian culture , Rituals , Ayurveda.

Introduction

The Vedic culture in ancient India was much advanced as compared to other parts of the world. The people during that era were dependent on plant kingdom for food , fodder , fuel , shelter and medicine . The ancient Indian science of medicine , Ayurveda , which is a natural & holistic medicine ; has discribed a number of plants used to prevent diseases as well as to cure them . Therefor many such species of plants are revered as God . Thus different religions and sects developed their own way of plant worship. There are numerous verses in Vedic literature depicting the relationship between various deities and plants eg. Trees considered as symbols of God in Hindu religion such as Bel tree (*Aegle mermelos* L.) for Lord Shiva , Pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa* L.) for Lord Vishnu , Vat (*Ficus benghalensis* L.) for Lord Shiva etc.

According to Ayurveda , nature is having a direct influence on basic body elements viz. *Vata* , *Pitta* & *Kapha* . Therefore the seasonal changes (*Rutu*) in nature bring about flactuations in these body elements . When these changes are within the normal limit , the human body adapts to these seasonal variations . But if certain precautions (*Rutu charya*) are not followed ; there is a possibility of a disease . On the other hand , nature has given the cure in the form of plants which grow during that perticular season . For the reason , certain plants are worshiped during various festivals celebrated in that perticular season .

A. Medicinal Plants worshiped

Different types of medicinal plants are in use for religious worships like trees , herbs , shrubs , Climbers . Parts of these plants such as root , fruits , seeds , leaves , flowers , buds , bark etc. are used in rituals for different purposes.

Table 1 : Medicinal Plants worshiped

| Sr.No. | Sanskrit Name | Botanical Name | Worship | Medicinal Properties |
|--------|---------------|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| 1 | Ashwattha | <i>Ficus religiosa L.</i> | Symbol of <i>Vishnu</i> Buddha received enlightenment under this tree. Hindus perform last rites under this tree. It is said that Agni had taken shelter in the form of horse in this tree. | Used in female infertility , diseases of genital tract , Skin disorders , Bleeding disorders , Cough , Joint swelling and pain. |
| 2 | Vat | <i>Ficus benghalensis L.</i> | Symbol of life & fertility. Related to Trimurti (<i>Brahma-Vishnu- Mahesh</i>) | Buds are used to promote fertility in females , bark is used to treat diarrhoea , skin diseases , Latex is used to treat PME in males , used to strengthen uterine muscles |
| 3 | Bilva | <i>Aegle marmelos L.</i> | Associated with Lord Shiva .Bhagwan Parasnath attained nirvana under this tree . | Anti inflammatory , anti diabetic , healing properties , unripe fruit is used to treat dysentery & diarrhoea |
| 4 | Tulsi | <i>Ocimum tenuiflorum</i> | Holy basil is Considered very sacred plant . Is included in poojas , consumed along with the prasadam . Associated with Lord Rama, Vishnu , Krishna | Used in <i>Kapha</i> disorders like cold , fever , headache , anti stress , antidepressant , anti microbial , wormicidal |
| 5 | Ashoka | <i>Saraca asoca (Roxb.)</i> | Lord Buddha was born under this tree . Cultivated in Buddhist monasteries . Flowers are used for temple decorations | Natural detoxifier and cleanser . Used to cure tumors , growth , useful in bleeding disorders. |
| 6 | Kadamb | <i>Neolamrckia cadamba</i> | Associated with Lord Krishna . Flowers are offered in pooja . | Leaves are used to treat infected wounds , ulcers . bark is used in gum diseases , useful in fever , renal calculi , gynaecological disorders. |
| 7 | Shami | <i>Prosopis cineraria (L.) Druce</i> | It is believed that Pandavas had kept | Indicated in cough , cold , dizziness , |

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| | | | their weapons on this tree . Leaves are offered in pooja. | worm infestation , asthma , bleeding disorders , diarrhoea , dysentary. |
| 8 | Durva | <i>Cynodon dactylon</i> | This grass is offered to Lord Ganesha . Considered as intellect promotor. | Nasal burning , burning micturation , bleeding piles , conjunctivitis |
| 9 | Japa | <i>Hibiscus rosa-sinensis</i> | Floweres are offered to Lord Ganesha . | Used to treat Alopecia , bleeding piles , menorrhagia , Diabetes |
| 10 | Kadali | <i>Musa paradisiaca</i> | The whole plant is used for decorative purposes in temples / sacred places . Fruits are offered in poojas. | Juice of stem is used in renal calculi , dehydration , burning sensation , hysteria , antidote for Arsenic toxicity. |
| 11 | Apamarga | <i>Achyranthes aspera</i> | The leaves of this plant are offered to lord Ganesha . | Diuretic , useful in urticaria , piles , growth , fibroids , ascites |
| 12 | Nimb | <i>Azadirachta indica</i> | Tree is the symbol of Godess Shitalamata . Leaves are consumed on occasion of Gudi Padwa . | Wound healing , detoxifier , used against worms and microbes, skin disorders |
| 13 | Parijatak | <i>Nyctanthes arbor-tristis</i> | This plant is believed to be brought by Lord Krishna on earth for his wife Satyabhama. | Useful in cough , fever , liver disorders, dysurea , joint disorders , intestinal worms |
| 14 | Arka | <i>Calotropis procera</i> | Leaves are offered to Lord Shani and Hanumana | Beneficial in cough abdominal tumors , bloating , cough , skin diseases , acts as laxative |
| 15 | Narikel | <i>Cocus nucifera</i> | It is very sacred tree . The fruit is utilised in poojas , It is a symbol of <i>Panchamahabhutas</i> . | Reduces burning sensation , heart burn , gastritis , fever , relieves dehydration |
| 16 | Kapittha | <i>Feronia linonia</i> | Fruits ,leaves are offered to Lord Ganesha. | Indicated in hiccups , vomiting , diarrhoea , relieves excessive thirst |
| 17 | Amra | <i>Mangifera indica</i> | Leaves are used to make sacred <i>toran</i> at the entrance of temples and houses . Leaves and fruits are | Antioxident , antidiabetic , antihelmenthic , antiparasitic , anti |

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| | | | offered in poojas as a symbol of prosperity. | viral ,anti spasmodic |
| 18 | Nagveli | <i>Piper betel</i> | Leaves are considered as sacred . Used in poojas as a symbol of good health and immunity. | Used in halitosis , Kapha disorders , Tastelessness , Asthma , Swelling , Tumors etc. |
| 19 | Zandu | <i>Calendula officinalis</i> | Flowers are used for decorations and offerings during Dashehara festival. | Relieves headache , toothache , wounds , swelling , Skin conditions like eczema , bursitis |
| 20 | Kamal | <i>Nelumbo nucifera</i> | The flower is a symbol of Goddess Laxmi . | Useful in Burning micturation , Haematuria , pigmentation scars , menopausal problems , burning |
| 21 | Poog | <i>Areca catechu</i> | Seeds are used in poojas to represent Navagrahas . | Useful to treat diarrhoea , hypertension , colitis , gastric problems , asthma , leucorrhoea |
| 22 | Haridra | <i>Curcuma longa</i> | Offered in poojas . symbol of fertility , growth , good omen | Anticancer , antifungal , antibacterial , antiallergic , anti aging , antiviral , antidiabetic |
| 23 | Shwet Chandan | <i>Santalum album</i> | Applied to statues of deity. Symbol of tranquility, peace | Relieves burning sensation , improves skin complexion , cleanses wound , stops secretions , useful in migraine , excessive sweating |

Table 2 : Parts of Medicinal Plants used .

| Sr.No. | Plant Name | Part Used | |
|--------|------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | | For Worship use | For Medicinal use |
| 1 | Ashvattha | Leaves , whole tree | Leaves , bark , latex , roots |
| 2 | Vat | Leaves , ariel roots , whole tree | Leaves , bark , buds , latex , roots |
| 3 | Bilva | Fruit , Leaves | Fruit , Leaves , bark |

| | | | |
|----|---------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 4 | Tulsi | Leaves , flower stalk | Leaves , seeds |
| 5 | Ashoka | Flowers | Bark , Flowers |
| 6 | Kadamb | Whole tree | Leaves , bark , flowers |
| 7 | Shami | Leaves | Leaves , bark |
| 8 | Durva | Whole plant | Leaves , Whole plant |
| 9 | Japa | Flowers | Flowers , leaves , root |
| 10 | Kadali | Whole plant , fruits, leaves | Stem , fruit , leaves |
| 11 | Apamarga | Leaves | Seeds , leaves |
| 12 | Nimb | Leaves | Leaves , bark , fruits |
| 13 | Parijatak | Leaves | Leaves , flowers |
| 14 | Arka | Leaves | Leaves , flower, root , latex |
| 15 | Narikel | Fruit | Fruit |
| 16 | Kappittha | Fruit | Fruit , leaves , bark |
| 17 | Amra | Fruit, Leaves | Fruit , leaves , bark |
| 18 | Nagveli | Leaves | Leaves |
| 19 | Zandu | Flowers | Flowers |
| 20 | Kamal | Flowers | Flowers , flower stem |
| 21 | Poog | Seed | Seed |
| 22 | Haridra | Rhizome | Rhizome |
| 23 | Shwet Chandan | Wood | Wood , oil |

B. Medicinal Plants used in *Havans* (Sacred Fire)

Havans or sacred fire / sacrifice ritual was practised since ancient time for protection from devils , purification of air . Rooted in Vedic religion , later on this was adopted by Buddhism & Jainism . Many medicinal plants were used during *havans* as a sacrifice . These plants soaked with honey and ghee used to be repeatedly cast in the sacrificial fire. (Table 3)

Table 3 : Medicinal plants used in *Havans* (Sacred Fire)

| Sr.No. | Sanskrit Name of Plant | Botanical Name | Part used |
|--------|------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| 1 | Arka | <i>Calotropis procera</i> | Wood |
| 2 | Palash | <i>Butea monosperma</i> | Wood |
| 3 | Khadir | <i>Acacia catechu</i> | Wood |
| 4 | Apamarga | <i>Achyranthes aspera</i> | Wood |
| 5 | Ashvattha | <i>Ficus religiosa L.</i> | Wood |
| 6 | Udumber | <i>Ficus racemosa</i> | Wood |
| 7 | Shami | <i>Prosopis cineraria</i> | Wood |
| 8 | Kush | <i>Desmostachya bipinnata</i> | Whole plant |

| | | | |
|----|---------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| 9 | Durva | <i>Cynodon dactylon</i> | Whole plant |
| 10 | Shwet Chandan | <i>Santalum album</i> | Wood |
| 11 | Rakta Chandan | <i>Pterocarpus santalinus</i> | Wood |

Thus a number of medicinal plants were given an important position in many sacred rituals . Similar practices are seen in other religious cultures like Islam . Many plants having curative properties are mentioned in Holy Quran such as Devdaru , Kharjur, Rason , Khadir , Shunthi , Madyantika . References are also seen in religious literature of Sikhism , Jainism , Buddhism etc.

Most of these sacred plants are used for the cure of various common ailments therefore their cultivation and preservation was promoted automatically due to their religious associations .

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