

[India's Savior of Sacred Plants](#)

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ETHNOBOTANY

## India's Savior of Sacred Plants

"Preservation through documentation and education." This is the modus operandi of Dr. S.K. Jain, the retired yet tireless defender of India's infinitely useful and especially sacred plants and trees. Jain, now 73 and still very active in the field, is the Scientist Emeritus of the National Botanical Research Institute in Lucknow. He began in the early 1960s by studying the ethnobotany of the Adivasi tribals in central India, in what then was an unprecedented effort. His objective was to record in scientific detail the tribals' medicinal use of plants. Later, his sister, a scholar of the Vedas, revealed to him how the same plants are described in the Vedas. His interest germinated, and soon his research blossomed to include recording how and why India's flora are found to be sacred. With this dual objective, he served the Botanical Survey of India for nearly three decades and was its director for almost seven years. He initiated and organized broad-based ethnobotanical studies in several parts of the country and coordinated all-India research projects in endangered species and ethonobotany. His work attracted funding from the Ford Foundation and the Smithsonian Institution of the US. At the request of Hinduism Today, Dr. Jain introduces this vast subject.

Dr. S.K. Jain, Lucknow

The extent to which plants in India are used in worship and medicine is unrivaled. The closest match would perhaps be the forest and mountain-dwelling tribals of Central and South America. Retired Harvard University professor Richard Evans Schultes, who is now over 90 years old, acknowledged this fact. In 1991 he described how India is "A nation blessed with an extremely diverse flora but likewise an extraordinarily large population of tribals who still have an unequalled, rich knowledge of the properties of their ambient vegetations." In India, this deep knowledge of and faith in plants, animals and forests has largely contributed to natural conservation of the environment and its biodiversity.

There is hardly any sphere of human activity in India where sacred plants do not play a role. Even nonbelievers who usually scorn at "mythology" and "magic-o-religious" beliefs are likely to pray at a particular tree or offer certain specific flowers when it comes to helping their ailing kith and kin. In my book, *Dictionary of Indian Folk Medicine and Ethnobotany* (1991, Deep Publications, New Delhi), I have enumerated some 2,500 species and 15,000 folk uses of plants in India. But there is much more knowledge yet to be codified.

Apart from individual plants, some whole forest patches are considered hallowed. These sacred groves are known locally as *vanrai*, and there are hundreds of large and small *vanrai* in India. A study has revealed the presence of several hundred such groves in the state of Maharashtra alone. Some areas, like the Mawflong forest in Meghalaya is the only original and virgin forest left in that region, and it harbors hundreds of rare and unique plants.

Sacred groves are believed to be the abode of certain deities or spirits. For example, the sacred groves in the western ghat in Maharashtra are believed to be the abode of deities and spirits such as Kalkai, Shirkai, Waghjai, Gangoba, Ram, Shiv, Bhim, Nagnath and many others. Usually there are no temples for these deities. Rather, a few vermilion-smeared stones at the base of a tree demarcate the spot as sacred, and there the folk worship and place flowers and their varied offerings.

Some trees are believed to have originated from bodies or limbs of Gods. The Peepul, or Bo-tree, was born from the body of Lord Vishnu. Palas, Flame of the forest, was born from the body of Brahma. Amla (Emblic myrobalan) rose from tears of Brahma and the Rudraksha (Blue marble tree) grew from tears shed by Siva. Harada (Chebulic myrobalan) evolved from a drop of nectar spilled onto Earth by the Gods. It is believed that Lord Brahma was born on a lotus, and it is commonly known that Tulsi (holy basil) is worshiped as an incarnation of the fianc  of Lord Krishna.

Some plants have become venerable only in recent times, as the species itself has been introduced into India in the last one or two centuries. Shivlingi (the Canonball tree) is a popular example. The name is due to the resemblance to the shape of a Sivalinga of the stamens that protrude and bend like the hood of a snake over the stigma.

Chandana, sandalwood, is among the elite and most renowned of sacred trees. The wood is rubbed on stone and the paste is widely used for anointing the forehead as well as for incense and in ayurvedic preparations. Temple deities are also bathed

with the paste. The famous Murugan temple at Tiruttani, Tamil Nadu, has a rare stick of sandalwood. It is ground for paste used in the temple rituals, which is then given to devotees. This special paste is lauded to have curative powers. But the mystery of this temple cure is that the stick of sandalwood is said never to shrink.

Rice and seeds such as sesame are associated with many rites. When proper statues are lacking for puja to the navagraha, the nine planets of Hindu astrology, Brahmin priests may invoke each planet by using the specific seed, spice or dal that is ritually associated with it.

For the performance of havana, or homa, the Vedic fire ceremony, the twigs of five species--Banyan tree, Bilva, mango, Pakur (Ficus lacor) and Peepul--are recommended. Certain regions in South India substitute mango, Pakur and Peepul with Palas, Deodar and Chandana. Of all the above, mango twigs are preferred. Bamboo is associated with the Brahmin thread ceremony and for worship of ancestors. Leaves of mango, Ashok and plantain (banana) are the most common materials for decorating places for sacred rituals and for festivals. The coconut or a fruiting branch of the Supari (Areca nut palm) are also commonly used.

Saving grace: The faith of the tribal and rural folk in the sanctity and utilitarian nature of these plants has directly resulted not only in their veneration, but in their preservation as well. Traditional taboos have effectively protected the purity and biodiversity of the environment and have enforced strict indigenous conservation. Yet due to urbanization and the

pressures of population, many sacred plants are rapidly becoming endangered. The socio-religious rules that restrict or regulate the collection of plant parts, even for or use in homa and other rites, have been a self-regulating mechanism between the human and plant kingdoms. Our generation must be committed to preserve these traditions of conservation for posterity.

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## WORSHIP

### In Gardens of the Gods

Hindu scriptures provide some general guidelines for the use of plants in worship. 1. Flower buds should not be offered. 2. Flowers found on the ground should not be offered, with the two exceptions, Parijata (coral jasmine) and Bakula (Elengi tree). 3. Red flowers are preferred for Goddesses, but with lotus, rose and kaner (oleander), all colors are considered equal.

The following is a list of Gods, Goddesses and planets and the plants that are specifically associated with them. Jasmine, pomegranate and Bakula are acceptable for all deities.

Brahma:Vata (Banyan tree).

Vishnu: Leaves of Tulsi (sacred Basil) and Vata; flowers of

Parijata. Taboo for Vishnu are Datura (thorn apple) and Shivalingi (canonball tree).

Shiva: Bilva (Bael fruit tree), Kachnar (Bauhinia), Ak (Crown flower), Datura, Amaltas (Golden shower tree), Kaner. The circle of flames surrounding Siva Nataraja is often decorated with Datura flowers.

Lakshmi: Flowers of Padma (lotus) and Parijata; fruits of Amla (Emblic myrobalan), Kela (plantain); Bilva.

Durga: Amra (mango), pomegranate, Asoka, Bilva, rice, turmeric, plantain, Mana (Alocasia indica) and barley.

Saraswati: Padma flowers; leaves of Dub (Bermuda grass).

Kali: Gurhal (Shoe-flower).

Rama and Jagannath: Tulsi.

Krishna: Tulsi, Kadamba (Wild Cinchona).

Ganesha: Ikh (sugarcane), white Ak.

Sun: Bilva.

Moon:Sim (Sarcostema acidum), Kapur (camphor).