



Sacred plants and their Ethno-botanical importance in central India: A mini review

Pankaj K. Sahu^{1*}, A. Kumari², Shweta Sao³, M. Singh¹ and P. Pandey¹

1, Department of Botany, Dr. C. V. Raman University Kota, Bilaspur (CG) - India

2, Plants Systematic Research Centre, Department of Botany, T. M. B. University, Bhagalpur - India

3, Department of Life Science, Dr. C. V. Raman University, Kota Bilaspur (CG) - India

Abstract

Sacred groves 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 environs of Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh in central India. A total of thirteen sacred groves and medicinal importance of thirteen genera and thirteen families were enumerated.

Key-Words: Sacred plant, Ethno-medicine, Medicinal value, Central India

Introduction

The traditional worship practices show the symbiotic relation of human beings and nature. Indigenous communities all over the world lived in harmony with the nature and conserved its valuable biodiversity. Plant have a vital role in human welfare and are continued to be valued industrial, economic, commercial and medicinal resources and some subcontinent with its wealth and variety of medicinal, many of which are even today in common uses much of which is steadily being eroded^{1,7,9}. Ethno-botanical exploration in biosphere reserve of central India was based on traditional knowledge of tribes⁸. Sacred groves are the tracts of virgin forest that were left untouched by the local inhabitants, harbour rich biodiversity, and are protected by the local people due to their cultural and religious beliefs and taboo that the deities reside in them. The man is using plants in various ways since existence of his life on the earth. They use it in many ways including worshipping gods and goddess for the protection and betterment of human life¹⁰. About two thousand plants are mentioned in the Ayurvedic, Unani and Tibbi systems of medicine. People rendered divine honour and worship trees and plants. Probably, tree worship is one of the earliest forms of religion in Ancient India. Sacred valued of plants has been well documented²⁻⁴.

In the words of Lord Buddha- the forest is a peculiar organism of unlimited kindness and benevolence that makes no demands for its sustenance and extends generously the products of its life activity. It affords production to all beings, offering shade to the axe man who destroys it. Bundelkhand region of M.P. has not been exploited for sacred plants except for some sporadic studies⁵⁻⁶. India has deep-rooted tradition of nature worship, which provide base for the conservation from the grass root¹¹⁻¹³. In this paper some of the plant species which have ethno medicinal importance but held sacred in this tribal dominating region of Madhya Pradesh are discussed.

Study area

Bundelkhand is spread in northern Madhya Pradesh between 26°30' north latitude and 81°40' east longitude. It includes six districts i.e. Datia, Tikamgarh, Chhatarpur, Panna, Sagar and Damoh (Fig. 1). In the central and southern part are rocky outcrops, stepped Vindhyan plateaus that rise 300 to 450 m asl. Hill ranges are prominent in Panna and Damoh districts, in the southeast, and Sagar district, in the southwest. All major rivers of the region flow from south to north, emptying into the Yamuna.

Methodology

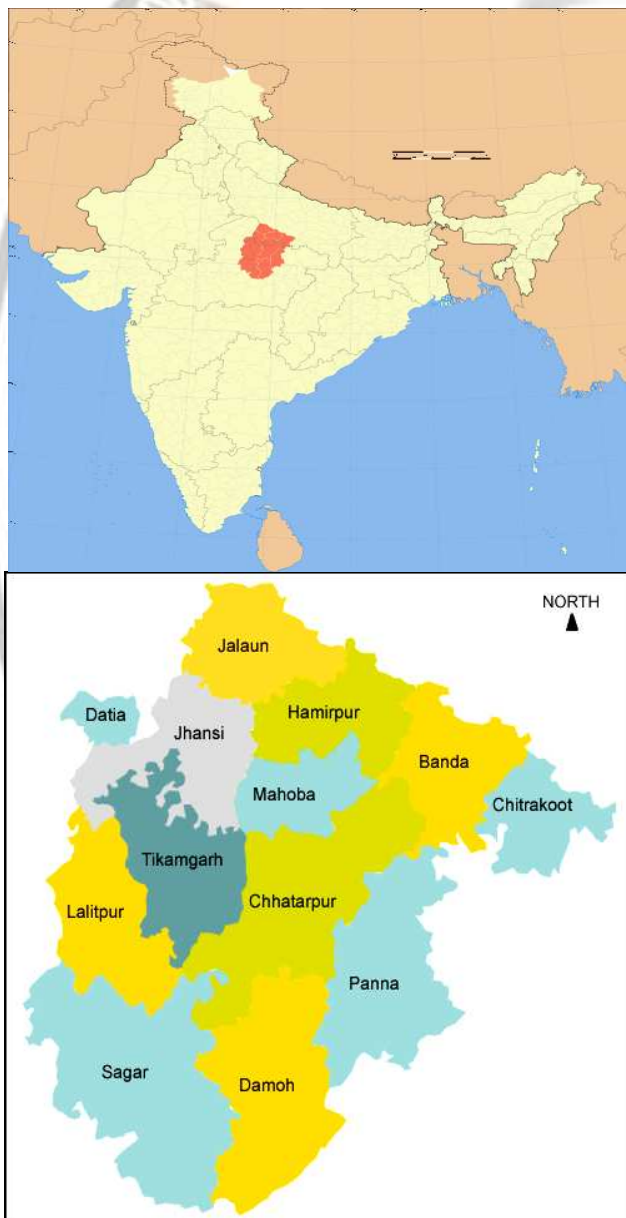
The present study is based on intensive field excursions during 2009-2010. Identification of collected plant specimens were done at Herbarium of Dr. Hari Singh

* Corresponding Author

E.mail: sahu.pankaj1@gmail.com

Gour University Sagar. Ethnobotanical information presented here was gathered with the help of tribal peoples, traditional medicinal practitioners and ethnic peoples of Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh central India. The collected voucher specimens with family, vernacular, sanskrit names, sacred value and medicinal importance of plants also been recorded during field trips.

Fig. 1: Red spot in map is showing the Bundelkhand region & different regions of central India



Results and Observations

Present works deals with identify folklore medicinally important plants frequently used by rural communities of sacred groves in central India. A total of thirteen sacred groves and medicinal importance of thirteen genera and thirteen families were enumerated.

1. *Aegle marmelos* L.

Family - Rutaceae

Local Name - Bel; Sanskrit-Sriphla, Bilva; English- the Bengal Quince or the Bel tree

Sacred value: 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.

2. *Areca catechu* L.

Family - **Areaceae**

Local Name - Supari; Sanskrit-Puga, Phulari; English - The Betal -Nut palm

Sacred value: The nut is used in many religious ceremonies and offered to Lord Vishnu in Satyanarayan Katha.

Medicinal Value: Nut powder with charcoal powder (3:1) used as tooth powder. Nut paste is with milk or water given to children for curing anthelmintic.

3. *Azadirachta indica* L.

Family - Meliaceae

Local Name - Neem; Sanskrit-Nimba; English- Margosa or Neem tree

Sacred value: 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.

Medicinal values: 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.

4. *Butea monosperma* (Lam.) Taubert

Family - Fabaceae

Local Name -Palas; Sanskrit-Kinsuka, Palasa; English-Flame of the Forest

Sacred values: 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.

Medicinal value: The bark and seeds are given for snake bite as antidote. Leaves powder is given with honey to children for curing ring worm.

5. *Calotropis procera* (Aiton) Aiton

Family- Asclepiadaceae

Local Name - Madar, Safed Aak; Sanskrit-Svaytaukum

Sacred values: Also called Aak (wedge) as the ancient name in the vedic literature. Its leaves are used in sacrificed rites. The flowers are used in the worship of Mahadeo and Hanuman. The Plant is regarded to be the transformation of Surya (Sun), as mentioned in Skand Purana. The leaves are as patri in the worship of Ganpati, Haritalika etc. On every Saturday leaves are made into garland and offered to Maruti (Hanuman). The twigs are used as a substitute for tooth brushes in the Smritisar Granth. The twigs are also employed in sacred fires as Samidhas (Hawan).

Medicinal value: Latex applied on boil and to the wound after scorpion sting for pain relief also. Oil smeared leaves warmed and tied to ripe boil.

6. *Cannabis sativus* L.

Family - Cannabaceae

Local Name- Bhang, Ganja; Sanskrit- Vijaya, Jaya; English- Hemp

Sacred value: Plants leaves with milk are used at time of mahashivratri festival offered for Lord Shiva by hindu as well other religion.

Medicinal values: Oil mixed with camphor applied to small boils. Plant with coconut water is taken for a week for curing diarrhoea.

7. *Curcuma domestica* L.

Family- Zingiberaceae

Local Name - Haldi; Sanskrit- Haridra; English-Turmeric

Sacred value: The rubbing of turmeric and oil is an essential part of the Hindu marriage festival as well as some religious ceremonies. The rhizome used in many religious ceremonies of the Hindus. Haldi pastes with water applied before wearing clothes, dyed with it are deemed to be a protection against fever.

Medicinal value: Rhizome powder with boiled milk is taken at bed time during cough, cold and also used in healing injuries.

8. *Cynodon dactylon* (L.) Pers.

Family - Poaceae

Local Name - Doob; Sanskrit- Durva; English-Bermunda grass

Sacred value: The plant is sacred for Hindus and niche in the temple of Hindu. Its offers for Lord Ganesh who is said to remove all obstacles in life. It is that the gram grass made its appearance when the sea of milk was churned by the gods and demons with the help of mountain Mandara as the remover of all sins as the three gods- Brahmas, Vishnu, and Mahesh reside in the three parts of its body- root, plant body and tips of leaves. The plant is worshipped on Durga Ashtami in the month of Bhadrapad Shukla Ashtami. This plant has a.

Medicinal value: The whole plant decoction used as Sharbat, it gives cooling effect. Washed leaves paste applied on cuts help in quick healing and its decoction (300 ml) taken orally in empty stomach early in the morning to control blood pressure. Whole plant juice is effective against cobra bite as antidote.

9. *Phyllanthus emblica* L.

Family- Euphorbiaceae

Local Name- Amla; Sanskrit-Umrital Amal, Amalki; English- Emblic Myrobalan

Sacred values: 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 'triphal') with warm water or milk acts a mild laxative. Triphala soaked in water and used for washing eyes.

10. *Ficus benghalensis* L.

Family- Moraceae

Local Name - Bar, Bargad; Sanskrit- Vata; English-Banyan

Sacred values: Hindu mythology says that Brahma was transformed into a Vat tree and it is viewed as the male to the peepal. It is considered as a sin to destroy both the trees especially the male. The dry twigs of the tree are used as Samidhas for producing sacred fire. The women folk worship this tree on Jeshth Shudh 15th (May to June), to water it, to wind a thread around it to worship it with genda (Indian marigold) flowers.

Medicinal value: Leaf extract given with milk to both men and women as an aphrodisiac. Warm paste of the aerial roots together with egg paste is applied in bone fracture and tied with the help of *Dendrocalamus strictus* for 3 days for the treatment of bone fractures.

11. *Ficus religiosa* L.

Family- Moraceae

Local Name - Peepal; Sanskrit-Aswaththama; English- Bo-tree, Peepal

Sacred values: The tree is sacred for Hindus, viewed as the female to the Banyan tree. According to the Valakhilya the marriage of peepal with the Tulsia is ordered. He further says that it is the transformation of the Gods Guru- Ashwath. The tree is worshipped on every month on which a new moon falls. Among the Hindus five sacred trees (i.e. Peepal, Gular, Bargad, Pakar, and Mango) Peepal ranks first. A good Hindu (Sanskari Hindu) while starting his journey if he sees a peepal tree, then he repeats the verse which may be translated - the roots Brahma, the bark Vishnu, and the branches Mahadeos. The Peepal is believed to be inhabited by the sacred triad – Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (Shiva) of its wood the spoons are made with which to pour ghee on the sacred fire (Home).

Medicinal value: Bark paste applied to sores of children (3-4 times a day) to get relief from apathies. Leaf bud is used in curing snake bite. Aqueous extract of bark shows anti-bacterial activity.

12. *Mangifera indica* L.

Family - Anacardiaceae

Local Name - Aam; Sanskrit-Amra; English- Mango Tree

Sacred value: Plant is sacred by the Hindus, connected with many mythological legends and folk lore. The tree is said to be a transformation of prajapati (Lord of Creatures). The flowers are used in Shiva worship, on the Shivaratri day. The flower is involved in Shakuntalam as one of the five arrows of Kamadeva. In Indian mythological study of Surya Bai (daughter of the sun) is represented as persecuted by a sorceress, to escape from whom she became a golden lotus. The leaves and twigs are employed in adorning mandaps and houses on occasions of various religious ceremonies. The twigs are used as samidhas and offered to sacred fire.

Medicinal value: Bark powder (50 mg) with cumin used for preventing conception. Leaf ash with honey used to cures the cough and cold. Unripe fruits boiled, given with rice and curd gives from diarrhoea and dysentery. Person bitten by cobra is laid on leaves, juice of the stem pith given orally and also applied externally as an effective treatment.

13. *Ocimum tenuiflorum* L.

Family - Lamiaceae

Local Name - Tulsi, Vranda; Sanskrit-Tulsi, Manjarika; English- the sacred basil

Sacred value: Most sacred plant in the Hindu religion, Brahmins held it sacred to Vishnu found in near every Hindu house and it's said that it protects from misfortunes, sanctifies and guides to heaven all who cultivate it. The mythological story narrates that the plant is a transformed nymph called Tulsi a beloved of Krishna and for this reason near every house it is cultivated, daily watered and worshipped by all members of the family. The leaves make one of the constituents of Charnamrit offered to Lord Vishnu.

Medicinal value: Tea with ginger or black pepper and tulsi cures cough and cold. Decoction of Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*), Black pepper (*Piper nigrum*), Adarak (*Zingiber officinalis*) with little salt is good for malaria.

Conclusion

The herbal medicines are mostly administered in the form of juice, decoction, paste or powder, prepared in a crude method from different plant parts such as root, bark, leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds and whole plant. In Madhya Pradesh of central India 265 sacred grove reported¹⁷ and plant worship in a way maintains local bio-diversity and plays an important role in its management and conservation. Women particularly, in both rural and urban areas, have developed faith in the number of plants by protection of the plant species. The *sacred plants* of bundelkhand are actually worshipped throughout the areas to its mythological significance. *Sacred* groves homes of mother goddesses abound and some types of trees have attained great importance in *Hinduism*. In India out of 3000 communities 1/3, i.e. 1000 are endogenous group practice totemism¹⁴. Among many tribal communities, numbers of clans are named after plants and animals which are conserved¹⁵. Work on traditional knowledge and indigenous medicinal plants used by tribal and local old age peoples of Amarkantak region and central India reported^{16, 8}. These plants also play a vital role in the life of the people in the form of medicines treating various ailments. 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.

References

1. Dastur, J.F. (1951). *Useful Plants of India and Pakistan*. D.B. Taraporewala Sons & Co. Ltd. Bombay, India 1951.

2. Gadgil, M. and Vartak, V. D. (1976 a) Sacred Grooves in India- a plea for continuous conservation. *J. Bomb. Nat. Hist. Soc.*, **72**: 314-320.
3. Gadgil, M. and Vartak, V.D. (1976 b). Sacred Grooves of the Western Ghats in India. *Eco. Bot.*, **30**: 152-160.
4. Issar, R.K. (1981). Traditional important medicinal plants and folklore of Uttarakhand Himalaya. *J. Sci. Res. Plant Med.*, **2**: 61-66.
5. Jain, A.K. (1988). Tribal clans in central India and their role in conservation. *Env. Conserv.* 1988, **15** (1): 368.
6. Jain, S.K. (1963). Magico-religious beliefs about plants among the adivasis of Bastar. *Q. J. Myth Soc.*, **53** (3): 73-94.
7. Mitra, S.C. (1922). On the Cultivation of the tree-goddess in Eastern Bengal. *Man in India*, **5**: 115-131.
8. Sahu, Pankaj K. (2010). Traditional knowledge and indigenous medicine of the tribal of Biosphere Reserve, Central India. *Int. Jour. Pharm. Life Sci.* **1**(8):471-478.
9. Schulted, R. E. (1960). Tapping our Heritage of Ethno- botanical Lore. *Econ. Bot.*, **14**: 257-262.
10. Ghate, V.S. (1998). Plant in patra pooja notes on their identification and utilization. *Ethnobotany*, **10**:6-15.
11. Gadgil M. (1987).Diversity: cultural and ecological, *Trends Ecol. Evol.*, (2) 369-373.
12. Gadgil M and Rao S., (1998).*Nurturing Biodiversity an Indian Agenda* (Center for Environment Education, Ahmadabad, 157.
13. Gadgil M. (2000) Graaroots conservation practices: Revitalizing the traditions, *In communities and conservation Natural Resources Management in South and Central Asia*. Edited by Kothari A., *et al.*, Sage Publication, New Delhi. 220-237.
14. Malhotra K.C. (2005).Personal Communication Bhopal, In India out of 3000 communities 1/3, i.e. 1000 is endogenous group practice toterism.
15. Jain A. and Sharma H.O. (1996). Ethnobiological studies of Shara Tribes of central India. *In Ethnobiology in Human Welfare*. Edited by Jain, S.K., Deep Publication, New Delhi, 390-392.
16. Kumar Ramesh, Suman N. R. and Dash S. S., (2004) Traditional Uses of Plants by Tribal of Amarkantak Region, Madhya Pradesh, *Indian Jour. Trad. Know.* **3** (4): 383-390.
17. Srivastava, M. K. (1994). Hill Korwa: Past, Present and Potential. Sri Mudran and Publication, Raipur.