
Ethnobotanical Studies of the Plants, Vegetation and Botany in Temples of India

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Abstract

Since ages, in the Traditional Indian Customs and Rituals and Hinduism particularly, Temples and their complexes have been the site of Plant Conservation and Protection. Plants, besides being worshipped as Gods or for being favourites of Gods and Goddesses, they are respected for their Nutritional and medicinal values and are used in temple complexes for ornamentation also. Plants have also been sculpted in walls, pillars and have been painted too. These temples signify the importance of Nature and behold the message of maintaining balance between nature and Sustainable Development. They also are a standing proof of the age of various plant species.

Key Words- Trees, Vegetation, Plants, Conservation, Hinduism, Worship, Traditions, Customs, Art, Architecture.

Introduction

India is largely an agricultural country whereby the Economy of the country lies in Agriculture, Botany, Culture and Traditions. India is known worldwide for its cultural traditions, rituals. Temples and Temple towns established in India are a part of this Traditional Indian System. This is because India is largely a Country with Hindu religion as its base that is to say that India is by and large a Hindu religion oriented country and a major chunk of its population follows Hinduism. To respect Mother Nature is in-built in Hinduism as Plants, Vegetation and Trees are worshipped by Hindus and treated like Gods. 'Earth' is treated like a 'Mother', 'Sun' is the 'God' (Fig.1A) while 'Sea' is the 'Father' according to the book 'Vishnu Puraan' in Hindu Mythology. This Botany which deals with the Plant World that surrounds us is reflected in the traditional Hindu Temples in many ways. One way are the plants that are used in rituals like sacrificial pyre or agni kund. Others include miscellaneous used of plants like the utensils, prasadam, the floral offerings to the lord, temple writings, plants for beautification of the Almighty, various fruit trees, plants for ceremonial processes, etc. Most of the times, in majority of the cases, the temples are self sufficient in growing the plants that they needed on a daily basis or for their everyday affairs.

Material and Methodology-

The initial stage was a review of literature which helped to discover the lacunae points where research or investigation could be carried out. The second step was to carry out a survey of the various major temples and collect samples of plants and vegetation from the complexes. The third step was to carry out the photography of temple sculptures and interesting sites regarding art and architecture. The next step was identification of plants based on Taxonomic studies or Pollen grain analysis or Anatomical Studies or leaf studies or foliar maceration or foliar peel techniques. This was followed by the

segregation of plants according to their economic importance and use. The last step was scripting the discussions and inferences.

Observation and Discussion-

Many of the Plants have been depicted in the Indian Temple Architecture, Art and Art forms. This is so because Vegetation and Greenery forms an indispensable and an inseparable part of the Traditional Indian System and Temples are typical representations of the Indian Culture, Religion and Traditions since ages for e.g. The Kashi Vishwanath Temple in BHU Campus (Fig. 1A,B).. In the past, the temple complexes and the very famous and great temples across India have harvested the seeds of scenic beauty through Greenery and Plantation of trees, herbs and Shrubs, especially the Ornamentals one. Few or a handful of Indian Temples have focused on the medicinal herbs and plants with medicinal base by growing them in their campus area. Many Temples have conserved plants and trees by growing them in their temple gardens. Many a plant species have been survived from extinction for their association with the faith, belief and religious practices of people from prehistoric times. It is obvious that religious practices and activities have played a potential role in protecting the Flora, Fauna, surrounding environment, and their diverse elements. The iconography of various Hindu Gods and Goddesses like Shiva, Vishnu, Surya, Kartikeya etc. have been represented by plants.

For e.g. Bel or *Aegle Marmelos* Correa is cultivated near Shiva temples and is sacred to Shiva. The trifoliate leaves of Bel represent the trinetra of Lord Shiva. Goddess Lakshmi who held the Lotus in her hand is said to offer Lotuses or *Nelumbo nucifera* L to lord Vishnu according to Vishnu Purana (Fig. 1F). Similarly, *Albizia lebbek* Benth. could be 'Sirisha' (Mohanty, R. B. & Mohapatra, B. K.; 1997) with rounded top and pinnate leaves which resembles the bi-pinnate leaves of *Albizia* sp. A very rare depiction of Coniferous plants was found in Barhut. This could most likely be purely decorative floral motif. The Naga lingam tree or *Couroupita Guianensis* Aubl., cultivated in South India, has fused stamen bands representing a look alike of Lingam, hence the name. Cycads and their leaves were sculpted in some temples of Andhra Pradesh. Shisham or *Dalbergia sisso* Roxb. is traditionally called as 'Shimshapa' (Mohanty, R. & Tripathy, P. K.; 2012) was carved at entrance gate of Buddhist Cave, Bhaja. The *Elaeocarpus Sphaericus* (Gaertn.) K. Schum. is the botanical name of Rudraksh tree, a tree associated with 'Rudra', another name of Lord Shiva. *Pyrus Communis* Linn. (Pande, T. 1964) and *Raphanus Sativus* Linn. was seen in Heliodorus pillar, Madhya Pradesh and in a temple of Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh respectively. Other plants represented as sculptures are *Saccharum Officinale* Linn., *Ravenala Madagascariensis* Sonn, *Solanum Melongena* Linn., *Syzygium Cumini* (L) Skeets. etc. Tulsi or *Ocimum Sanctum* Linn. is regarded as a Goddess perhaps because of the medicinal values it holds.

The Mango tree for Ekambareshwar Temple, the Jambu tree for Jambukeshwar Temple, Trichurapalli and the Tillai tree for Nataraja Temple, Chidambaran, Tamil Nadu was considered as a sthalavriksha (Gunasekaran, M. & Balasubramnyam, P. J.; 2012). Trees worshipped as abode to tree gods were usually sculpted with a stone platform under it while the floral offering was sculpted on the platform. The vastra episode of Jain God Gomateshwara is flora and a creeper or vine as seen in Shravanbelagola temple statue, Karnataka. (Fig. 1C). Not only have plants played a vital role in the Temple arena but many Indian temples have depicted the beauty of plants in their Sculpture, Carvings or the wall Paintings (Fig. 1 B, E, F, H). These Plants have been represented either as a shade to the Lord (Fig. 1G) (Fig. 1D) or as

a key holding material to the Gods and Goddesses (Fig. 1C) or have served as a ride to many worshipping Deities.

Conclusion-

The trees witnessed in campuses and temple complexes have been regarded as sacred as seen and mentioned in texts like Vishnu Purana, Shiv Purana, etc. these stories have found to be true in their nature. They have been found to be related to the common Folklore or religious epics or stories or ancient fables. It has been found that with the passage of time, the moral obligations with respect to the protection of holy places and religious trees are fading out this is due to the changing socio cultural fabric of the society with respect to the current times. It is a grave situation wherein a serious thought to the impending problems must be sought after and concrete steps and possible measures must be taken for the conservation of the indigenous tree species before they disappear from the Earth. The survey also helped us realize that it was because of Govt. Bodies like ASI (Archaeological Survey of India) that the existing greenery has been preserved.

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