

Role of Sacred Plants in Religion and Health-care system of local people of Almora district of Uttarakhand State (India)

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Abstract: Uttarakhand, the mountainous state of Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) is famous for its religious culture, traditions and pronounced as Dev Bhoomi (Land of Gods). People of this state are highly religious and variety of rituals related to God, Goddess worships are performed in various ways, round the year by the local people in which plants have their defined roles and importance. A preliminary survey was carried out to find the role of sacred plants in the lifestyle and health-care system of local people of Almora district of Uttarakhand State. It was observed that 19 plant species have high utility and importance in such religious activities as well as traditional healing system. These believes not only show the human relation with plant diversity but also help in conserving these species. [Academia Arena, 2010;2(6):19-22] (ISSN 1553-992X).

Key words: Religious beliefs, Traditional culture, Sacred rituals, Healing system

Introduction: The human culture, customs, ethos, religious rites, legends and myths, folk tales and folk songs, food as well as medicinal practices are deeply associated and influenced by the plants (Badoni and Badoni, 2001). Indian culture has cosmic believes for all happenings in their life, including sickness and sufferings, besides also have a close association and respect for many animals and plants in religious activities (Ranta and Pirta, 2007).

Hindu religion and culture firmly preached that all constituents of our ambient nature are part and creation of supreme power itself. The God has bestowed some specific powers to certain plants, animals and even rivers, mountains and places, which play an important role in prosperous human life. Hindu scriptures tell us that a wide range of plants like *Ficus religiosa*, *Azadirachta indica*, *Ocimum sanctum*, *Centella asiatica*, *Curcuma longa*, *Cynodon dactylon* has divine qualities, hence used in a number of religious activities and rituals

from marriage, baptism to health care systems (Robinson and Cush, 1997).

Materials and Methods: The present study was carried out in Almora district in the year 2008, to find out the importance of plants in the religion, culture and health care system of local people. The information regarding the use of plants in the religious activities and traditional healing system, amongst the local people, was collected through consulting the local people and traditional herbal healers.

Results: Present study shows that 19 plant species are associated with the sacred beliefs and have religious importance. These plant species are regularly used by the local people in various religious activities and traditional healing system. The uses of each plant are enumerated in Table 1.

Table 1: Plant species of religious values with their medicinal utility

S. No.	Botanical Name	Local / English Name	Sacred Belief with their utility
1.	<i>Aegle marmelos</i> Corr.	Bilwa / Holy fruit tree	Leaves are offered to please Lord Shiva. In many ayurvedic formulations, its leaves and fruit are being used as anti diabetic agents. Local people use the squash of pulp of fruit to cure the digestive disorders.
2.	<i>Artemisia nilagirica</i> (Cl.) Pamp.	Paati / Fleabane	Leaves, mixed with ghee (clarified butter) are used as incense to attract positive powers. The paste of leaves are used in skin diseases and Aroma therapy.
3.	<i>Capsicum annum</i> Linn.	Mirch / Chilly	The smoke of the red chillies is

			inhaled to ward off the evil spirits. Local people use its powder with mustard oil on dog bite.
4.	<i>Cedrus deodara</i> (Roxb.) Loud.	Devdar / Cedar	The fragrance of wood repels poisonous animals like snake and scorpion, while its oil is used in Aroma therapy.
5.	<i>Curcuma longa</i> Linn.	Haldi / Turmeric	Powder of rhizome is considered as a good antiseptic. Associated with planet Jupiter, its paste is applied on the face and body of the bride and groom to get blessing, as an auspicious ritual on the day of marriage.
6.	<i>Cynodon dactylon</i> (L.) Pers.	Dubra / Bermuda grass	It is used in almost all religious rituals supposed to please Lord Ganesh (The Elephant Head God). The paste of plant is applied on the cuts and wounds.
7.	<i>Euphorbia ligularia</i> Roxb.	Suyal / Crown of thorns	The plant is potted on the roof top and is believed that it protects home from the natural lighting strokes. This plant is also worshiped to please Lord Shiva. Local people use its latex in dental caries.
8.	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> Linn.	Peepal / Sacred fig tree	This is one of the most sacred tree, associated with planet Saturn and Jupiter, and worshiped to need of blessing on almost all rituals. The oil medicated with its leaves is used as ear drops.
9.	<i>Mangifera indica</i> Linn.	Aam / Mango	Wood is used in worship and to perform fire sacrifice (Hawans). Associated with planet Venus, its leaves are also used in making string for doors on every auspicious occasion to attract positive power of nature. The powder of seeds is prescribed in case of diarrhoea and dysentery.
10.	<i>Musa paradisiaca</i> Linn.	Kela / Banana	This sacred plant is worshiped mainly on Thursday, as associated with planet Jupiter. The stems are used to make pavilion during various sacred rituals. Fruits are offered to please deities. The fruit is given with milk to cure body weakness.
11.	<i>Ocimum sanctum</i> Linn.	Tulsi / Holy Basil	Associated with Lord Vishnu, the creator of this universe. This sacred plant is worshiped daily due to a belief that it wards off the evil spirits from home. The leaves are used with common salt to cure toothache and decoction in common cold.
12.	<i>Oryza sativa</i> Linn.	Dhan / Rice	Its husked seeds are used in various

			sacred rituals and worship. It is also used for auspicious mark (Tilak) on forehead with turmeric or sandalwood paste as blessing of fertility. Rice paste is also used to decorate place of worship. The rice water is used as nourishing drink.
13.	<i>Piper betle</i> Linn.	Pan / Betel pepper	Its leaves is used in all religious ceremonies and regarded as a pleasure to Goddess Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth). The leaves are chewed to sweeten the breathe and improve the voice.
14.	<i>Prunus cerasoides</i> D. Don.	Paiya / Wild Himalayan cherry	Its leaves are offered to deities to get their blessings. The seeds are chewed in case of kidney stones.
15.	<i>Pyrus malus</i> Linn.	Seb / Apple	The fruit is offered to the deities and its juice is used to improve the digestive system.
16.	<i>Rhododendron arboreum</i> Sm.	Buransh / Rhododendron	Flowers are offered to deities in almost all religious functions and its decoction is used to cure diarrhoea and dysentery.
17.	<i>Tegetes erecta</i> Linn.	Gainda / Marigold	The flowers are used to make garlands for deities. The paste of flower is used externally in eye diseases.
18.	<i>Urtica dioica</i> Linn.	Kandali / Stinging Nettle	The twig is carried with the new born baby in traveling to ward off the evil spirits. The root extract is used in case of tooth cavity
19.	<i>Zanthoxylum aromatum</i> DC.	Timura / Bamboo-Leaved Prinklish Ash	The twigs are kept in houses to keep away evil spirits. Local people use its seeds in making traditional tooth powder.

Discussion: The importance of plants in human life as food, fibre, cosmetics etc. was discussed time to time by many researchers. But the religious aspects of plants are not given any attention and not much explored. Some researchers explained the recognition of some specific plants in human culture such as Nargas and Trivedi (2003) pointed out that *Azadirachta indica* is worshiped in India and its leaves are used to keep away the evil spirits, while in case of Rajasthan, it is associated with the farmers traditional method of weather forecasting. The association of plants with folk songs was discussed by Manral and Pande (2004). Mao (2003) explained the use of plants in symbolic and superstitious activities of the Naga tribe in Manipur. Dafni *et al.* (2006) reported that the Muslims of Northern Israel use some sacred plants in cemeteries of graveyards to repel the evil sprits, as their good odour and divine medicinal qualities. Shah (2006) reported that the rhizomes of *Nardostachys jatamansi* are generally used as incense mostly in the

temples in high Himalayas due to the believe that its smoke drives away the evil spirits and attracts Godly powers.

The traditional culture and religion of human beings have deep faith in the nature and its components in every walk of life. Dhiman (2003) have discussed the sacred plants and their medicinal importance with special reference to Indian context. Tiwari (1995) has explained that the Rajis and Shauka tribes of Uttarakhand depend on the spirit possessed person and some sacred plants for curing diseases. While western medicine has still not found efficient medicines for psychosomatic diseases, over 200 species of medicinal plants are being used in the cultural and religious activities of local people of Northern Peru, for the treatment of psychosomatic diseases (Bussmann and Sharon, 2006). Shirazi and Morowatisharifabad (2009) observed that greater

religious involvement play as a protective factor in high-risk sexual behavior, which promote safe sex. Similar to above studies, during the present research, it was observed that the religious activities boost up the mental health of local people of Almora district. Many of these sacred plants are found in almost every household in the study area and are used in religious activities as well as for health care. These sacred plants are even worshiped by the local people for get blessing of health and wealth by positive powers of nature. In this way these sacred plants play a major role in the mental as well as physical health of local people.

Dhar *et al.* (2002) reported that local people of Uttarakhand, consider Bughiyal (the alpine zone, which is full of variety of herbs, grasses and Cedar trees), as the abode of Gods. It is believed that these Gods and fairies visit these sacred zones on special occasions and on fullmoon nights, with supernatural powers. These traditional believes supports CBD (Convention of Biodiversity) in the way of sustainable utilization of natural resources. The religious customs, protect the part of the forests, where deities resides and worshiped and tend to preserve that area as sacred grove (Adhikari and Adhikari, 2007). The religious activities as well as hypothesis also act as conserving tool for bio-diversity. So, it is necessary to preserve and promote these aesthetic values to conserve bio-diversity and nature, which will surely play a role in betterment of human beings.

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