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Review Article

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## Socio-religious Plants of Terai Region of U.P., India

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**Abstract:** Plants being the oldest companion of man influenced his culture and civilization very much, which themselves born, grown and flourished very deep in the dense forests. Our ancestors imparted this knowledge to us through various folk-tales, mythological stories and events in the epics. Lots of religious practices and worship in houses and temples on various festivals and ceremonies are still followed right from the birth to death, all associated with plants. These associations can be traced from prehistoric age to present so called civilized age without interruption. This submission discusses 36 plant species which are used in socio-religious ceremonies in and around Gonda and Balrampur districts of Terai region of U.P., India.

**Keywords:** Ethnobotany, Folk-religion, Socio-religious plants, Terai region, U.P.

### Introduction

It is an established fact that the plants have played crucial role in the socio-cultural development of human species concurrently in the different parts of human civilization. However, in Indian subcontinent this influence have had far greater impact because of varied climatic conditions and diversified socio-economic conditions. Indeed the socio-religious aspect of plants is usually abstract and in vogue, therefore, apparently left untouched by most of the ethnobotanists. But the thorough analysis of this aspect provides certain unexplored scientific background, may be in abstract form but can be implemented in conservation planning and economic wellbeing. Since these practices are deeply linked with past scriptures therefore, their present relevance must be worked out. In last few decades some workers (Gupta 1971; Gandhi 1989; Pandey 1999, 2009; Shah 1994, 1997, 2004; Kumar & Yadav 2004 etc.) have paid their attention towards such investigations.

### Material and Methods

During ethnobotanical explorations, various sites in and around Gonda and Balrampur districts of U.P. were visited several times and Purohits (a section of Brahmins performing various religious ceremonies) and old people were consulted from almost all sections, to gather information regarding the importance of plants in folk-religion and mythology. The voucher specimens were carefully identified following standard methods and deposited in the Duthie Herbarium, University of Allahabad, Allahabad. In sum, as many as 36 plant species were recorded to be used in different socio-religious ceremonies, which are enumerated alphabetically here under:

### Enumeration

1. *Achyranthes aspera* L. (Amaranthaceae), 'Lahchichra' P.01, Ramnagar.

**Folklore:** Plant a blessing of lord Shiva; roots and leaves

offered to departed soul during pind daan, to show path to heaven to the soul, as it is common along roads.

2. *Aegle marmelos* (L.) Corr. (Rutaceae), 'Bel' P. 33, Planted.

**Folklore:** Tree a seat of lord Shiva; trifoliolate leaves offered to lord Shiva on Mahashivratri, an all-night vigil is kept and special worship offered with leaves (Chaudhuri & Pal 1990); wood fire used to offer havan to the lord Shiva during Malmas. In central India the tribe Gauria snake charmer, use the name of the tree with that of Dhanvantari, the celestial physician in certain magical rites performed to cure snake bite (Gupta 1971).

3. *Areca catechu* L. (Arecaceae), 'Dali, Supari' Sold.

**Folklore:** Nuts sacred; symbol of Goddess Gauri; worshipped for the success of ceremony; smeared with turmeric and distributed to relatives as invitation.

4. *Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lamk. (Moraceae), 'Kathal' P. 73, Planted

**Folklore:** Tree a symbol of lord Prajapati; leaves used as lamp pot to offer to departed soul every evening during post cremation ceremonies.

5. *Azadirachta indica* Juss. (Meliaceae), 'Neem' P. 34, Common.

**Folklore:** Tree a residence of Goddess Sheetla; worshipped in Navratra and Shrawan Shukla Saptami; twigs oscillated over the body of small pox patient as Goddess blessing for early recovery; green trees not axed in flowering season.

6. *Bambusa arundinacea* Ait. (Poaceae), 'Bans' P. 186, Ramnagar.

**Folklore:** Plant a symbol of victory flag of lord Hanuman; a plant tied with triangular red cloth at its apex called dhawaja is placed at ceremonial spot, in odd numbers, for its success; not axed on Sunday and Tuesday.

7. *Boswellia serrata* Roxb. (Burseraceae), 'Lohbaan, Salai' Gum sold.

**Folklore:** Gum sacred to Mohammedans; fumigated to welcome rooh (the spirit) in muharram days and on every Thursday in Kabristan to departed soul.

8. *Butea monosperma* (Lamk.) Taub. (Fabaceae), 'Paras, P. 97, Ganaghat.

**Folklore:** Tree symbol of lord Brahma who turned into this tree due to a curse of Parvati (Jain 1991); woody branch presented during yagyopavit sacrament by guru as Brahmastra in brahmins. Wood used to make dummy, if corps lost (Jain 1991).

9. *Canarium euphyllum* Kurz (Burseraceae), 'Dhoop' Sold.

**Folklore:** Wood a food of fire, since fire is mouth of God hence food of God; wood offered routinely to fire; constitute major part of havan samagri for yagya.

10. *Cannabis sativa* L. (Cannabaceae), 'Bhang, Ganja' P. 53, Tajpur.

**Folklore:** Plant leaves food of lord Shiva; offered daily in lord's temple and especially on Mahashivratri as well as every 13th of month.

11. *Cocos nucifera* L. (Arecaceae), 'Nariyal' Planted and sold.

**Folklore:** Plant a seat of lord Vishnu; fruit a symbol of good luck; offered to God; place on the top of Kalas; nut covered with chunari (red cloth piece) offered to the Goddess Kali during Navratra as a symbol of human head.

Legend related to the origin of the plant is that: Rishi Vishwamitra sent king Trishanku (Satyabrata) from earth to heaven by his superhuman power obtained by long austerities, lord Indra got annoyed over this and sent back the king from heaven to earth but he was stopped by the Rishi by putting a pole under him which ultimately became the coconut tree. (Wilson 1961).

12. *Commiphora wightii* (Arn.) Bhandari (Burseraceae), 'Gugur' P. 138, Tajpur.

**Folklore:** Stem and latex sacred; latex offered to fire kindled from mango wood in Hanuman pooja on Tuesday and Saturday, latex fumigation relieves patients suffering from evil eyes.

13. *Cucurbita pepo* DC. (Cucurbitaceae), 'Khabha, Bhathua' Cultivated.

**Folklore:** Flowers and fruits auspicious; flowers used to make crown of Ravana on Vijadasi and the effigy thus decorated disposed off in the evening as victory over him; fruits cut transversely as a symbol of goat sacrifice, offered to the lion of Bhagwati Durga during Navratra.

14. *Curcuma longa* L. (Zingiberaceae), 'Haldi' Cultivated.

**Folklore:** Rhizome and its colour auspicious; 5 rhizome pieces with jaggery, rice and grass presented during female's farewell; rhizome paste smeared rice used in Navgrah worship and distributed among relatives and friends to share in Srimadbhagwat Mahapuran Katha; rhizome paste massaged over body of couples before marriage; areca nut smeared with rhizome paste distributed as invitation to appear in any auspicious ceremony.

15. *Cynodon dactylon* (L.) Pers. (Poaceae), 'Doob' P. 74, Ubiquitous.

**Folklore:** Plant considered bearing triple powers together: Lord Brahma—roots, Vishnu—stems, Shiva—leaves (Jain 1991), a symbol of creation, maintenance and destruction respectively; 5 plants with rice, turmeric and sweet gifted to woman leaving her home.

16. *Datura metel* L. (Solanaceae), 'Dhatoor' P. 160, Tajpur.

**Folklore:** Flowers and fruits, food of lord Shiva; offered in Shiva's temple on every 13th of month (according to Hindu calendar) and on mahashivratri.

17. *Desmostachya bipinnata* (L.) Stapf (Poaceae), 'Kush' P. 158, Tajpur.

**Folklore:** Plant a symbol of Brahma; symbolic cow is made from plant and offered to purohiths with grains, clothes and sweets etc.; Baitarni (a mythical cow) is made from the plants during death-bed to carry the departed soul across Bhavsagar (a mythical ocean) from where the path goes to heaven; symbol in religious ceremonies; used for reconstructing corpse, if dead body lost for cremation; also used to make effigy of priest, if one not available for shraddha (a ceremony to remember dead ancestors (Jain 1991)); used for making kush-asana (sitting cushion) during pooja or yaggya; also used to sprinkle water chanting mantras for the purification of the place of pooja or yaggya and the people participating therein.

18. *Ficus benghalensis* L. (Moraceae), 'Bargad' P. 22, Ubiquitous.

**Folklore:** Tree a symbol of lord Shiva who turned to this tree to save himself from Bhasmasur (a demon blessed by him, "on whom so ever head he will put hand, will burn to ash"); worshipped on Saturday by ladies desirous of sons; young maids tie sacred threads to get handsome husbands; usually not axed by Hindus because of belief that attendants of lord Shiva reside in prop roots and may eradicate the whole family of person involved.

19. *Ficus religiosa* L. 'Peepal' P. 20, Ubiquitous.

**Folklore:** Tree a residence of lord Narayan; worshipped on Saturday by mothers to protect their sons from evil eyes; also tie 101 rounds of threads around the trunk and distribute sweets for the welfare of family; no sin is committed beneath canopy; not axed as believed to be Brahmin and the sin Brahmatya.

20. *Hordeum vulgare* L. (Poaceae), 'Jav' Cultivated.

**Folklore:** Fruit grains food of God; basic ingredient of haven samagri; Kalas decorated with grains sandwiching in cow dung; new grain festival celebrated after harvesting crop; flour used to make symbolic body (Pind), offered to departed soul during cremation.

21. *Madhuca longifolia* (Koen.) MacBr. (Sapotaceae), 'Mahua' P. 32, Planted

**Folklore:** Tree a seat of Goddess Chhasti (6th); dried flowers soaked in milk, distributed among children by mothers on Lalhi chhasti (held on 6th of dark moon of Bhadrapada) for their good luck and long life; leaves used to make pots to offer milk to cobra on Nagpanchmi days.

22. *Mangifera indica* L. (Anacardiaceae), 'Aam' P. 194, Planted.

**Folklore:** Tree a symbol of lord Prajapati; leaves used as Kalas crown in every religious ceremony; leaves tied on string used to decorate ceremonial spot; twigs with leaves intact, used to sprinkle water, chanting Mantras by purohiths over the people sharing any pooja; wood used for sacred fire for yagya and seat is made for wedding couples.

23. *Musa paradisiaca* L. (Musaceae), 'Kela' Planted.

**Folklore:** Plant a symbol of Guru Brahaspati (teacher of gods); culms planted on both sides of ceremonial gate; worshipped on Thursday; fruits offered to lord Narayan in Satya Narayan Pooja; inflorescence offered to Goddess Kali as symbol of sacrifice on the 9th of Navratra; sinful to axe before flowering and fruiting.

24. *Ocimum sanctum* L. (Lamiaceae), 'Tulsi' P. 41, Planted in courtyard.

**Folklore:** Plant a symbol of Sati Vrinda, as she turned to plant due to curse of lord Vishnu; planted in courtyard to keep away evil spirits; leaves offered to Shaligram (symbol of Vishnu), as he turned to stone due to the curse of Sati Vrinda; worshipped by Hindu ladies, putting lamp of ghee underneath in evening and offering water and flowers in morning; planted on burial spot of dead, if well established the soul goes to heaven otherwise not; 5 leaves in a pot full of water, so auspicious as the water of the Ganga, used to take oaths to settle disputes; 108 beads wreath, used by devotees of Ram and Krishna; green plant not destroyed; dried plants ceremonially immersed in nearby pond or river (Chaudhuri & Pal 1990).

25. *Oryza sativa* L. (Poaceae), 'Dhan' Cultivated.

**Folklore:** Plant a symbol of Goddess Laxmi; inflorescence worshipped on Deepawali; nail peeled 11 grains offered to lord Shiva; new crop grains celebrated on Karvachouth (4th of the darkmoon before Deepawali); taking cooked rice is an indication of intimacy, if someone is socially boycotted, his kith and kin stop taking it in his home or with him; rice smeared with turmeric paste, used in worship, distributed to relatives and friends to share in Srimad Bhagwat Mahapuran Katha; rice gifted with jaggery, grass and 5 rhizomes of turmeric to woman leaving her home.

26. *Phyllanthus emblica* L. (Euphorbiaceae), 'Aonwala' P. 141, Planted.

**Folklore:** Tree a symbol of lord Narayan; in tula lagna a get together under canopy removes sins, gives long life and good luck; green trees not axed.

27. *Piper betle* L. (Piperaceae), 'Paan' Cultivated.

**Folklore:** Plant a symbol of honour, passion and love as Kamdev, the God of love and sex resides on leaves; leaves offered to gods and goddesses in every pooja; beera (leaves folded with areca nut, catechu and lime) has special social value; left hand offering and receiving beera, a symbol of enmity but right hand, a symbol of love and friendship, salute after offering it to elders, a symbol of honour.

28. *Pterocarpus santalinus* L. (Fabaceae), 'Devichandan' P. 248, Tajpur.

**Folklore:** Grounded wood, a symbol of blood sacrifice; offered to Goddess Durga during Navratra; applied on forehead by devotees of Goddess.

29. *Saccharum munja* Roxb. (Poaceae), 'Moonj' P. 247, Dasiyapur.

**Folklore:** Plant a symbol of Laxmi the Goddess of Prosperity; Inflorescence covering, leathery leaf is Moonj, offered to the Goddess on Deepawali; first janeoo is made from moonj during Yagyopavit sacrament.

30. *S. officinarum* L. 'Ganna' Cultivated.

**Folklore:** Plant a blessing of lord Vishnu to the people of earth; inter nodal pieces offered to lord in Satyanaryan pooja and distributed as prasad (blessing); the stem with apical portion intact worshipped on 11th of full moon after Deepawali and chewed as prasad on next day, before this, plant is neither cut nor chewed by Hindus.

31. *S. spontaneum* L. 'Kans' P. 150, Tajpur.

**Folklore:** Plant a symbol of Goddess Chhasti (6th); worshipped by fasting mothers on 6th of dark moon of Bhadrapad tiding as many knots in leaves as many children they have; also used in marriage ceremony; blooming an indication of end of monsoon.

32. *Santalum album* L. (Santalaceae), 'Chandan' P. 122, Khudepur.

**Folklore:** Sacred; leaves and fruits offered to lord Shiva; wood used in religious ceremonies (Jain, 1991), grounded wood paste used as ink to write Sitaram on Belpatra (leaf of s of sons; young maids tie Aegle marmelos) offered to lord Shiva's on Mahashivratri to please the lord, paste also smeared over Shivling, to bring down the heat, applied on forehead by devotees.

33. *Sesamum orientale* L. (Pedaliaceae), 'Til' Cultivated.

**Folklore:** Plant of ritual values ; black seeds offered with handful water for 13 days as homage to departed soul, also offered to lord Ganesh on 4th of moon of Magh by fasting mothers for the welfare of their sons; stem used as tooth brush and leaves as hair cleaner on that day by fasting mothers.

34. *Syzygium aromaticum* (L.) Merrill & Perry (Myrtaceae), 'Laung' Sold.

**Folklore:** Unopened buds a symbol of Goddess Kali; 5 buds offered in temple with water, flowers and sweet routinely, in Navratra especially.

35. *Vetiveria zizanioides* (L.) Nash. (Poaceae), 'Ganra' P. 158, Tajpur.

**Folklore:** Inflorescence a symbol of Goddess Laxmi; worshipped on Karvachauth, on 4th of dark moon in Kartik month before Deepawali by married women for the welfare of their husbands; 5 brooms made from inflorescence, worshipped on Deepawali by oldest lady of the family.

36. *Ziziphus mauritiana* Lamk. (Rhamnaceae), 'Ber' P. 174, Tarabganj.

**Folklore:** Plant revered for fruits as offered to lord Ram by Saveri, during exile; offered to lord Shiva and Mother *Parvati* on *Mahashivratri* by nubile to get handsome husbands; not planted in yards, as it is abode of witches and evil spirits.

#### Discussion and Result

The abstract form of beliefs and taboos are usually very strongly rooted in the Indian society, thus their scientific relevance is vague. However, certain symbolic practices indicate their past relations, as for instance, the offering of transversely cut fruits of *Cucurbita pepo* as a symbol of goat sacrifice, offered to the lion of *Bhagwati Durga* during Navratra, indicates that goat sacrifice and *Bhagwati Durga* worship has long tradition in the society. Similarly, offerings of coconut covered with *chunari* (red cloth piece) and inflorescence of *Musa paradisiaca* to Goddess Kali as symbol of human head on the 9th of *Navratra* indicates the tradition of human sacrifice in the log past which has turned symbolic due to legal implications of law of the land.

The religious uses of some plants such as *Achyranthes aspera*, *Aegle marmelos*, *Azadirachta indica*, *Boswellia serrata*, *Canarium euphyllum*, *Commiphora wightii*, *Curcuma longa*, *Cynodon dactylon*, *Datura metel*, *Ocimum sanctum*, *Phyllanthus emblica*, *Piper betle*, *Pterocarpus santalinus*, *Santalum album*, *Syzygium aromaticum* etc. may be attributed to their medicinal and psychoactive properties. Similarly, the socio-religious relevance of *Areca catechu*, *Artocarpus heterophyllus*, *Bambusa arundinacea*, *Ficus benghalensis*, *Hordeum vulgare*, *Madhuca longifolia*, *Mangifera indica*, *Musa paradisiaca*, *Oryza sativa*, *Saccharum munja*, *S. officinarum*, *S. spontaneum*, *Sesamum orientale*, *Vetiveria zizanioides*, *Ziziphus mauritiana* etc. can be credited to their economic importance in terms of their uses as food, fodder, furniture, firewood, thatching and building materials. However, the abstract beliefs about *Desmostachya bipinnata* (kush) is enigmatic. Its multifarious uses in socio-religious practices are still a nut to be cracked.



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