



“Investigating the Ethnobotanical Relevance of Unique Sacred Plants in North Western Himalaya: A Case Study of Mandi District, Himachal Pradesh, India.”

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ABSTRACT

Sacred or magico-religious plants have been always remain integral in the ritual, cultural and spiritual practices of many different communities throughout history. Furthermore, there is no part of the world where plants are not held in particularly high regard. Numerous indigenous groups maintain this custom via oral history and honour their gods during all stages of life, from celebrating a child birth to lamenting a death. Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh also referred as ‘Choti Kashi’, is known for its traditions and religious culture. Hence, the present study has been carried out to document the unique traditional knowledge of sacred plants used by the folklore of Mandi district. The present study documented 17 plant species belonging to the 13 families that were being used in numerous religious ceremonies. The use of sacred plants contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage. Therefore, it is important to use these plant species in a sustainable manner that have both cultural significance and ecological integrity.

INTRODUCTION

India’s cultural history is multifaceted; its numerous ethnic groups still celebrate old customs, festivals and rituals, even in the face of modernization. Plants are important natural resources that provide housing, tools, food and other magical and material cultural necessities (Pangging *et al.*, 2021). Since human civilization began, there has been an awareness of plants, which are the earliest creation of God on Earth. Furthermore, there is no part of the world where plants are not held in particularly high regard (Devi *et al.*, 2020). There is a strong belief in Hinduism that certain plants have been endowed by God with holy qualities, and that these plants are then used in ceremonies and in combinations to alleviate human illnesses (Sharma *et al.*, 2022). The symbiotic relationship between humans and nature is demonstrated by the ancient worship customs. Indigenous people around the world coexisted peacefully with the environment and protected its priceless biodiversity (Sahu *et al.*, 2013). There are several taboos and magico-religious beliefs in tribal communities. They hold the view that some deities and gods live atop in forest’s trees. They will

ruin their entire clan if they do not treat them with respect. That’s why they preserve the plant species which they considered sacred. Numerous indigenous groups maintain this custom via oral history and honour their gods during all stages of life, from celebrating a baby’s birth to lamenting a death (Sharma & Pegu, 2011). The human culture, customs, ceremonies, ethos, folk tales, folk music, folklore, cuisine, and medical practices have all been closely linked to and influenced by plants (Badoni & Badoni, 2001).

One of the oldest religions in the world is the worship of plants. India is home to numerous deities that are revered throughout the nation. The people present various plant parts to the gods, such as leaves, flowers, twigs, seeds, bark and fruits. Native people of the study area are well aware of the custom of using plants for spiritual reasons during major rituals like worship, celebrations, weddings and for other purposes (Samant & Shreekar, 2003). Indian societies have long been rife with beliefs about the existence and malevolent powers of various spirits and ghosts, for which various sacred



plants are used to eliminate them. A significant portion of the Indian populace resides in rural areas, and these beliefs are more well-known there than in the urban areas. In the religious and cultural rituals of every rural civilization, plants are indispensable (Thakur *et al.*, 2021). An invaluable resource for a country is its traditional wisdom. Documenting such knowledge and doing scientific validation has become urgently necessary. It would be an irreversible loss to civilization if such knowledge systems disappeared (Geetu Krishna & Sanil Kumar, 2019).

In the present study, data on the plant species which are held sacred and are used in magico-religious practices by the folklore of the region are documented and enumerated. The informants of the region claim that these plants also confer therapeutic benefits when used in magico-religious rituals carried out by experts like priests, wizards and elderly members of the community.

Material & Methods

Study Area

The district Mandi is located in the midlands of the Himalayan range. It lies between latitude 31° 72' N and longitude 76° 92' E and covers a total geographical area of 3,950 km² which is 7.1% area of the entire state. The district is situated in Himachal Pradesh on the banks of Beas river and at the convergence of the Suketi Khad stream. The zone has a complex terrain with altitude varying from 450 to 4,800 m. The climate of district varies from wet sub-temperate to alpine climate with snowfall at higher altitudes.

Survey and Data Collection

People in Mandi district have strong belief in God as the religion regulates the actions in almost every sphere of life. That's why the particular district is also known as 'Varanasi of Hills' (Choti Kashi). A comprehensive and methodical survey was conducted throughout many villages in the study area to gather data on the species of magico-religious plants utilised by the folklore of the Mandi district. Before starting the investigation, a thorough poll was organized for selecting the informants. Since, magico-religious rituals are carried out by experts such as priests, spiritual leaders, wizards, village heads and traditional healers. These experts were recognised and surveyed by means of group discussion and open interviews in order to collect data regarding the sacred

values of the species. During the survey, information about the local name, altitudinal range, flowering and fruiting stage was also gathered and recorded in the field notebook along with the religious virtue.

Results & Observations

The current endeavour focuses on identifying plants that are of sacred importance and are used by the folklore of the study area. A total of 17 genera of sacred value belonging to 13 families were enumerated alphabetically.

1. *Abies pindrow* (Royle ex D. Don) Royle (Pinaceae)

Synonym(s): *Pinus naphtha* Antoine, *P. pindrow* Royle ex D. Don

Vernacular name: Tosh, Talispatri

Altitudinal range: 2,200-3,200 m

Flowering & fruiting: April-September

Religious use: The tree has a deep ritualistic linkage with Shri Dev Kamrunaag, the most powerful deity of Mandi District. All rituals here start with worshipping of the group of 7 trees of Tosh (*Abies pindrow*) and Rai (*Picea smithiana*) in the temple precincts by the priest of Dev Kamrunaag to appease the deity. Nobody is allowed to pluck any part from these seven trees; photography of these trees is also strictly prohibited by the Dev Committee.

2. *Achyranthes aspera* (L.) (Amaranthaceae)

Synonym(s): *A. australis* R. Br., *A. fruticosa* Desf., *A. obovatifolia* Stokes, *Aerva aspera* Spreng., *Digera muricata* Mart.

Vernacular name: Phutkanda

Altitudinal range: Upto 1,500 m

Flowering & fruiting: April-September

Religious use: Whole plant is worshipped in "Karjitrya Poojan". This day-long celebration, common in the Mandi, Sundernagar and Balh locales of the region, involves fasting by the married ladies and worship of Dhaan (*Oryza sativa*), Phutkanda (*Achyranthes aspera*) and Kachalu (*Colocasia esculenta*). It is believed that revering *A. aspera* ensures wellbeing and long life of their spouses, while venerating *O. sativa* will never keep them hungry.



3. *Aegle marmelos* (L.) Correa. (Rutaceae)

Synonym(s): *Belou marmelos* (L.) A.Lyons, *Bilacus marmelos* Kuntze

Vernacular name: Bilpatri

Altitudinal range: Upto 1,200 m

Flowering & fruiting: March- August

Religious use: Thetree is worshipped by the newly wedded couple. It is believed that such worship makes the bonding of the newly-weds strong like its fruit.

4. *Artemisia vulgaris* (L.) (Asteraceae)

Synonym(s): *A.michauxii* Besser.

Vernacular name: Charmara

Altitudinal range: Upto 1,500 m

Flowering & fruiting: July- October

Religious use: Twigs used in "Gau poojan" by the valley people. This gau poojan is done on the day of 'Sakrant' falling in the month of July - known as "Chidanwan Saaja". On this day ticks are removed from the cow's body and are burnt followed by putting garlands made of the twigs of Charmara (*Artemisia*) and Gatth Phool (*Tagetes*) around their neck to keep pests, ticks and mosquitoes, so abundant during rainy season, away.

5. *Betula utilis* D.Don (Betulaceae)

Synonym(s): *B. bhojpattria* var. *latifolia* Regel

Vernacular name: Bhuj

Altitudinal range: >3,500 m

Flowering & fruiting: May- August

Religious use: The papery bark of tree carries a significant importance in the age-old Dev tradition in the Mandi District, under which the bark was used to write horoscopes and in talisman. Mantras are inscribed on the bark, consecrated, and put in talisman for wearing around the neck (especially children) or for keeping at a raised place in puja to ward off evil eyes and other negative powers. Kids wearing such talisman is a common sight in the valley.

6. *Brassica rapa* subsp. *campestris* (L.) Clapham (Brassicaceae)

Synonym(s): *Raphanus chinensis* Crantz, *Sinapis campestris* Besser

Vernacular name: Saro

Altitudinal range: Upto 2,000 m

Flowering & fruiting: February- April

Religious use: Seeds find regular use in local rituals in the valley, are entranced by the "Gur" (Priest of the

local deity) and doused in burning coal. The radiating smoke, known as "Dhuni", is accepted by the devotees to ward off evil eyes and negative energies.

7. *Butea monosperma* (Lam.) Taub. (Fabaceae)

Synonym(s): *Plaso monosperma* Kuntz., *Erythrina monosperma* Lam.

Vernacular name: Palah, Dhak

Altitudinal range: Upto 1,800 m

Flowering & fruiting: March- July

Religious use: Flowers have significant place in tantra mantra and offered to Maa Kali in tantrik rituals. Dried and powdered flowers are used to play Holi with local deities and this age-old tradition is still continuing.

8. *Calotropis procera* (Aiton) Dryand. (Apocynaceae)

Synonym(s): *Asclepias procera* Aiton, *Apocynum syriacum* Garsault

Vernacular name: Aak

Altitudinal range: Upto 900 m

Flowering & fruiting: March- July

Religious use: Roots are considered sacred. According to many priests/ tantriks, if a person is prone to accident, he should keep the roots of the plant in his pocket. Moreover, keeping the roots at home wrapped in red cloth is considered to bring prosperity and keep the evil eyes away.

9. *Carissa spinarum* L. (Apocynaceae)

Synonym(s): *Arduina inermis* L.Schum., *Jasminonerium edule* Kuntze

Vernacular name: Kharnoo, Khirmi

Altitudinal range: Upto 1,500 m

Flowering & fruiting: April- November

Religious use: Roots are crushed and spread on top on the snake pit. It is believed that the snakes flee away because of its pungent smell.

10. *Cedrus deodara* (Roxb.ex D.Don.) G.Don (Pinaceae)

Synonym(s): *C. indica* Chambray, *Pinus deodara* Roxb. ex D.Don.

Vernacular name: Kelo, Dayar, Deodar

Altitudinal range: 1,500- 3,000 m

Flowering & fruiting: August- November

Religious use: This tree has high sacred values. Most of the "Garbh Grah"/ Sanctum sanctorum of the



temples of local deities are constructed from the wood of Deodar. (Deodar means Abode of Deo/ Deity in Pahari dialect).

Pollen dust is collected from the sacred grooves of the deities with prior permission of the concerned deity and are used during rituals (polishing and shining of Mohras of the deity) and special Poojans. The pollen dust is also used to play “holi” with the deities.

11. *Ficus benghalensis* L. (Moraceae)

Synonym(s): *F. banyana* Oken, *F. indica* L., *Urostigma benghalensis* Gasp., *U. elasticum* Miq.

Vernacular name: Bargad, Bar

Altitudinal range: Upto 1,200 m

Flowering & fruiting: March- May

Religious use: Whole Plant is considered sacred and is worshipped by the folklore specially by women on Vatsavriti Vrat. It is believed that worshipping of this sacred tree on Vatsavriti Poornima gives longevity to their beloved husbands.

12. *Ocimum tenuiflorum* L. (Lamiaceae)

Synonym(s): *O. hirsutum* Benth., *O. sanctum* L.

Vernacular name: Selly Mata, Krishna Tulsi

Altitudinal range: Upto 2,700 m asl

Flowering & fruiting: July- October

Religious use: Tulsi Vivah/ Panch Bheekham is five days festival, considered very auspicious by the women, is celebrated twenty days after Diwali. Since ‘Tulsi’ is worshipped in every house of the district; the festival is celebrated like daughter’s marriage. ‘Tulsi’ plant is decorated with stems of *Saccharum officinalis* (Ganna), *Phyllanthus emblica* (Amla) and *Tagetes erecta* (Gatt Phool). After five days of celebration, Tulsi is married to ‘Saligram’ (a form of Lord Vishnu).

13. *Prunus cerasoides* Buch.- Ham. ex D.Don (Rosaceae)

Synonym(s): *Prunus hosseusii* Diels, *Prunus majestica* Koehne, *Prunus pectinata* Walp., *Prunus silvatica* Roxb.

Vernacular name: Pajja, Padmaka

Altitudinal range: 1,000- 2,500 m

Flowering & fruiting: October- May

Religious use: Twigs are of great ritual importance. These are used to make canopy shaped structure called

‘Toran’ during the weddings. The bride and groom take bath under the ‘Toran’ set up in their respective homes as preparatory to marriage before they wear their wedding dress. It is believed that taking bath under the twigs of ‘Pajja’ swipes away any evil eyes and negative energies.

14. *Prunus persica* (L.) Batsch (Rosaceae)

Synonym(s): *P. laevis* DC., *P. platycarpa* Decne.

Vernacular name: Aadu, Aaroo

Altitudinal range: Upto 2,500 m

Flowering & fruiting: February- July

Religious use: Twigs have ritualistic value and used as an essential part of last rites during cremation.

15. *Punica granatum* L. (Punicaceae)

Synonym(s): *P. florida* Salisb., *P. spinosa* Lam.

Vernacular name: Daaran, Daar

Altitudinal range: Upto 2000 m asl

Flowering & fruiting: April- September

Religious use: Whole Plant is considered sacred and worshipped by the newlywed couples. It is trusted that if the couple revere the plant, it will keep the family joined in the same manner in which its seeds are encased in the rind.

16. *Skimmia laureola* Franch. (Rutaceae)

Synonym(s): *S. laureola* (DC.) Decne.

Vernacular name: Ner, Nairpatri

Altitudinal range: 2,200- 3,200 m asl

Flowering & fruiting: May- October

Religious use: ‘Chandoe’, a garland made of Ner leaves, ‘jambhiri’ (*Citrus sp.*), ‘Rakhal’ twigs (*Taxus wallichiana*), and ‘Bodi phool’ (*Narcissus tazetta*), is hung on the doors during Shivratri in Seraj valley and Karsog valley.

17. *Zanthoxylum armatum* DC. (Rutaceae)

Synonym(s): *Z. alatum* Roxb., *Z. planispinum* Siebold & Zucc.

Vernacular name: Timbar, Tirmir

Altitudinal range: 1,000- 2,000 m asl

Flowering & fruiting: April- September

Religious use: Leaves have magico religious beliefs. The leaves along with cow dung cake are placed at the threshold of the house on the ‘Dagvaans’/ ‘Dainvaans’



(New Moon of Witches) in Balh, Karsog and Sundar Nagar areas to keep the negative energies away.

Conclusion

The belief in supernatural powers by humans dates back to time immemorial. Every belief has a backstory that links it to the desire to appease someone or the fear of something. Rural populace hold strong belief in God and supernatural powers that have an impact on them. The natural resources such as lakes, trees, stones, forests and springs are always connected to supernatural powers. In conclusion, the magico-religious plants of a particular region play a significant role in the cultural, spiritual and traditional fabric of the society. These plant species are not solely botanical entities; they are also acutely blended with the rituals, beliefs and folklore of the local people. The usage of these plants in cultural rites, healing practices, and religious ceremonies emphasizes the enduring relationship between the natural world and humans. Moreover, the use of magico-religious plants and their cultivation contribute to the protection of cultural identity and heritage. Passed down through generations, the knowledge and practices associated with these plants form an integral part of the local wisdom, assisting a sense of continuity and belonging among community members. That's why it is very crucial to approach the conservation and sustainable use of these plants with a balanced perspective that respects both ecological integrity and cultural significance.

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