

Major Religious Plants of Rudraprayag District (Garhwal), Uttarakhand (India)

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Abstract

The Himalayas are one of the richest sources with respect to the occurrence of religious plants. These plants contribute to religious activities and are also important as food, fodder and medicine. Presented here are the descriptions of 21 religious plants which are traditionally used by local people in the Rudraprayag district (Garhwal) for various religious activities.

Key Words: Religious plants, used parts, religious uses, Devbhumi (Uttarakhand).

Introduction

The people are keeping the high religious reverence on plants from ancient time to present time because Uttarakhand state is popularly known as “Land of Gods” (Devbhuni) which consists of Garhwal and Kumaun. Religious practices or ceremonies are performed on various auspicious occasions to seek blessing of Gods. Various plants and their products which are being used by human day to day need to use in Havan (burning of herbal ingredients, Kumar *et al.* 2007) and other religious activities like Katha, Vrat, festivals, Pathpuja, Pitrasharadha ceremony. Our ancestors followed old folklores. Survival and sustenance in Garhwal depended on vegetation near the place of residence. For medicinal treatment villagers have their own remedies using various plants. It is believed that people in ancient time were more healthy as compared to modern people because of their way of life in harmony with natural surroundings. Illnesses or medical disorder were thought to be curses by gods, goddesses and evil spirits. So the treatment frequently involved prescription of herbal drugs accompanied by religious practices like fasting, worshipping to purify evil spirits. Author have tried to identify the plants which are being used in religious activities.

According to various legends different plants and their parts (i.e. root, stem, leaves, seeds and

fruits) are used in different places for various worships. In this study the description of religious plants is based on a survey and also discussion with local users (villagers) of Rudraprayag district and considered important in the life of a human being.

Study Area

District Rudraprayag (Garhwal) of Uttarakhand state is the remote area in terms of lifestyle and is also famous for its world fame pilgrimage like Kedranath, Tunganath, Madhmaheshwar, Ukhimath, Guptkashi, Tirjuginarayan, Kalimath etc. The villagers perform all the religious activities like Katha, Vrat, festivals etc. in the district. The present study was carried out in Makku, Giria, Khod, Banoli and Bhanaj villages of the Rudraprayag district (Garhwal).

Material and Methods

The present study is based on a reconnaissance survey. This survey was conducted for knowing about the religious plants and their uses by local people of district Rudraprayag. During the survey the author have interviewed with some villagers to assess the information on major religious plants of the area. The survey was conducted during 2006-07. All the information was recorded throughout a long discussion along with the villagers.

Results and Discussion

A total of 21 religious plants species belonging 19 genera and 14 families from the Rudraprayag district Garhwal has been listed below.

Anacardiaceae

1. *Mangifera indica* L. 1753

Local name: Aam

Used part: Leaves, fruit and wood.

Religious use: Leaves of mango are used for the control of evil spirits. Generally green leaves with other religious plants leaves like Peepal, Bar etc. are used for decoration of new homes and even Havankund (a sacred place). Kumar, et al. (2007) mentioned the wood of mango is used to perform the Havan because its wood is easily burnt with maximum smoke. The ashes are used to prevent itching on the body.

Asteraceae

2. *Artemisia edgeworthii* Balakr.

Local name: Kunraj and Pati (Johar)

Used part: Leaves

Religious use: Leaves of inflorescences mixed with butter used for local incense (Rawat & Pangtey, 1987).

Brassicaceae

3. *Brassica campestris* L. 1753

Local name: Gharia and Sarsoon

Used part: Seeds and flowers

Religious use: Seeds of *B. campestris* are used for yielding oil and this oil is considered as pure for lighting lamp (deepak) and cooking. The yellow flowers of *B. campestris* are offered to god on a festival of flowering season called 'Ghoga' (in Garhwal) and Kumar et al. (2007) described 'Fuldhei' (in Kumaun).

4. *B. juncea* (L.) Czern.

Local name: Rai and Rara or Raru

Used part: Seeds

Religious use: Seeds of *B. juncea* are used for the treatment against evil spirits during some religious activities.

Fabaceae

5. *Vigna mungo* L. 1834

Local name: Kali dal, Urad dal and Maans

Used part: Seeds

Religious use: A mixture of Kali dal (*Vigna mungo*) and rice (*Oryza sativa*) locally called 'Khichra' is used for offering to Van Devta (forest god) against evil spirit. On the day of Saturday fast it is offered to 'Shani Dev'. According to the concept of Kumar et al. (2007), from the ancient period 'Khichri / Khichra' is the symbol of goddess Kali and god Kalbisht.

Juglandaceae

6. *Juglans regia* L. 1753

Local name: Akhrot

Used part: Fruit

Religious use: A mixture of five dried fruits (viz. Akhrot, Kaju, Kismis, Badam & Chuwara) locally called 'Panchmewa' and is generally used in some religious ceremonies. The fruit of *Juglans regia* is dried and does not decay and generally considered pure.

Moraceae

7. *Ficus auriculata* Lour (syn. *F. roxburghii* Wallich ex Miq.)

Local name: Timulu

Used part: Leaves

Religious use: Leaves of *F. auriculata* and other green leaves are used in any religious activity because utensils are considered impure for the gods. Therefore only the leaves are used.

8. *Ficus religiosa* L. 1753

Local name: Peepal

Used part: Leaves and whole tree

Religious use: Peepal leaves are considered auspicious for 'Panchapallav' (a string of five leaves of either peepal or mango). Leaves of peepal etc. are tied around the waist of person performing 'Jneu' or 'marriage' ceremony. It is believed that panchapallav gives protection against 'Bhoot', devils and other evil spirits. Peepal tree is worshipped with leaves and stem. The wood or dried twigs of peepal are used for performing Havan.

Musaceae

9. *Musa balbisiana* Colla 1820

Local name: Kela

Used part: Fruit, leaves and whole tree

Religious use: It is pure and holy fruit used in religious activity like Katha. It is eaten generally during fasts. The fruit, rhizome, stem and leaves are all worshipped. In the Katha (worship) of Lord 'Satyanarayan' the whole banana tree is worshipped being regarded as representation of Lord Satyanarayan.

Pedaliaceae

10. *Sesamum orientale* L. 1753

Local name: Til

Used part: Seed

Religious use: Generally black Til is used in religious work like Havan with barley (*Hordeum vulgare*), Ghee and Dhoop. It is believed that of the dead body's soul after the death of a person, sesamum is used for relinquishment (Tilanjli) at the crematory on 13th day after the death.

In entered into the social and religious life of the people since use of sesamum in 'Sraddha' and other ceremonies as mentioned in Apastomba, Dharma Sutra, Aevalayana, Grhya Sutra, Baudhayana Grhya Sutra, Baudhayana Grhyaasesa Sutra, and Gobhila Grhya Sutra (Mehra, 1967).

Pinaceae

11. *Pinus roxburghii* Sargent 1897

Local name: Chir

Used part: Wood

Religious use: In the pine dominated regions of the district Rudrapraya, small pieces of *P. roxiburghii* are popularly used in Havan or Yangya.

Poaceae

12. *Hordeum vulgare* L. 1753

Local name: Jaw or Jav

Used part: Seed and whole plant

Religious use: Jaw assumed always pure. In modern time people generally do not use it for eating but save it for Havan, worship and other social customs. Kumar et al. (2007) mentioned barley emerging aroma is believed to be appreciated by the gods.

13. *Triticum aestivum* L. 1753

Local name: Gehun

Used part: Seed

Religious use: Wheat flour is used to prepare chapati's (puri) and also to prepare sweet dish (halwa) for offering to god and worshipping.

14. *Oryza sativa* L. 1753

Local name: Sathi or Dhan

Used part: Seed

Religious use: Seeds of *O. sativa* is donated to Brahamins. It is believed that all crops are boon of gods. The rice is used in the cooked form (kheer, bare, puri etc.) and is offered to god in the form of oblation.

15. *Cynodon dactylon* (L.) Persoon

Local name: Daab, Dubar, Dood, Durwa

Used part: Whole plant

Religious use: *C. dactylon* is considered as protector against evil and hard times. It is prayed that the family show prosperity like the roots of 'Dooop'. Therefore, it is used in every worship. The roots of *C. dactylon* can not be destroyed. They live forever.

16. *Saccharum spontaneum* L. 1771

Local name: Kush

Used part: Whole plant

Religious use: Kush is considered synonymous to a Brahamin and it is used only during Jneu and Shradha ceremony (Kumar et al., 2007). Image of Lord Brahma is made from leaves of Kush (Pande et al., 1989). Kush is worshipped from the time of Lav & Kush, the childern of Lord Ramchandra and Goddess Sita.

Rosaceae

17. *Prunus cerasoides* Don. 1825

Local name: Payan, Padam

Used part: Leaves and branches

Religious use: The leaves and branches of *P. cerasoides* are worshipped during Katha, Jneu & marriage ceremony. Kumar et al. (2007) nicely described the Padam tree is originated from the water or from the head of 'Shesnag'. It is believed that the animal transport of Lord Vishnu, bird Garur brought Padam along with 'Shesnag' on this earth. Therefore it is worshipped.

Family Rutaceae

18. *Skimmia anquetilia* Taylor & Airyshaw

Local name: Naar or Nair

Used part: Leaves and roots/ rhizomes

Religious use: Aromatic leaves and roots of *S. anquetilia* are used as dhoop. The leaves of Nair are offered to god Kedarnath & Tunganath in the high altitude tempals of Lord Shiva of Rudraprayag district Garhwal.

19. *Zanthoxylum armatum* DC. 1824

Local name: Timru

Used part: Branches

Religious use: Shrubby branches or sticks of *Zanthoxylum armatum* are worshipped in Jneu sanskar and in a folk dance (Jagar) and considered symbolic of folk god 'Narsingh'.

Valerianaceae

20. *Valeriana jatamansi* Jones

Local name: Shamioh

Used part: Roots/ rhizomes & leaves

Religious use: Aromatic leaves and roots or rhizomes of *V. jatamansi* are used as incense.

Zingiberaceae

21. *Curcuma domestica* Valetton

Local name: Haldi

Used part: Roots/ rhizomes

Religious use: In various religious activities the roots or rhizome of *C. domestica* are applied for dyeing of cloths etc.

Conclusion

Many traditional societies all over the world value a large number of plant species from the wild for a variety of reasons, for food, fiber, shelter or medicine. The practice of nature conservation is a very ancient tradition. The practice of conservation of plant species by the traditional societies of Garhwal Himalaya dates back to millennia. The people of Garhwal Himalaya have a rich tradition of nature conservation through socio-religious constraints on profligate use of common property

resources (Anthwal et al, 2006). The ancient ethics changed by rejection and replacement of traditional practices under the influence of western cultures and by the advent of modern industry.

Garhwal Himalaya is referred to as land of gods as many important religious shrines are located besides the confluence of five tributaries of sacred river Ganges. Although, biological diversity of Himalaya is very rich, however, very little is known about the religious plants this region. Trees have been regarded as an indispensable part of life and their importance described in the epics has great impact on mankind. They maintained equilibrium for the subsistence of life till the last century, when the increase in population and the tendency towards industrialization started to disturb this equilibrium. Natural resources like land, water, air and plants can no longer be considered free and inexhaustible resource. The basic elements of nature in the form of *Prithvi* (Earth), *Agni* (Fire), *Jal* (Water), *Vayu* (Air) and *Akash* (Space) were always worshipped or revered in one or the other form from the ancient times as per the Hindu mythology.

Our cultural or religious activities has served the purpose of conserving our traditional heritage since the time of Vedas and Puranas. During the survey done by the author and by the discussion with local villagers it has been concluded that due to modernization and escapism there has been decrease in the conservation and traditional importance (utility) of religious plants.

The members of family Poaceae and Rosaceae are used maximumly in the religious activities as they are represented by five species (5 genera) and three species (3 genera) respectively.

There is strong need to initiate people's participation, training for promoting the indigenous traditional knowledge and conserve the religious plants through traditional knowledge. It is hoped that this study will focus attention for need to conserve faith of our religious activities. They in turn serve to conserve biodiversity of our useful plants.

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