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Invaluable roles of plants from vedic period to current period

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Abstract

Plants give happiness both here and hereafter. On the earth and hereafter. The paper highlights the importance of plants from religious, ritualistic, cultural and economic point of view, this paper gives emphasis on the idea of plants dates back to ancient times from the four Vedas: The Rig-Veda, the Yajurveda, the Samveda and the Atharvaveda. Rig-Veda and Atharvaveda trace the history of plants and its uses, since the ancient civilisation. Moreover Hindus believe that they are indebted to trees, as they are the source of our survival, by providing us with oxygen to breathe. The Medicinal and religious importance of trees and plants have co-influenced each other, in establishing their significance. This will also provide a rich source material for understanding the ancient Indian plant biology.

Keyword: Rig-Veda, plant, environment, atharvaveda, puranas, current period

Introduction

Man's existence on the earth has lived close association with nature. All his life is surrounded with it and never goes beyond of it. In vedic period, men lived close proximity of nature, with trees, plants, herbs, shrubs, the familiarity and association of man. They are the most intimate and friendly. For man, trees and plants are always favourable to him. Trees and plants always a good source for men, when he saw the light of civilization, in the shyness men need to cover his body parts with the barks and leaves of trees. The trees and plants provided him fuel, wood, shade, for dwelling different places. Gradually to the need of shelter trees provided him logs and timber for building their living rooms. Like a mother it provides him various things to his needs, like feeding him with variety of fruits, for appearing his hunger, it also provided cotton for making thread which was woven into garments. The supreme importance of plant world life lies in the gift of various kinds of food grain which sustains the lives of people. With the progress of civilization, men learnt to use plants and herbs, the roots of some trees as drugs for craving various diseases. This paper aims to make a comprehensive and systematic assessment on the description of plants described from Vedic period till date. The study would provide the easy identification of plants, their importance in various Vedic rituals, magical, medicinal and secular significances and their utilizations for mankind. This also provides a rich source material for understanding the ancient Indian plant biology. Vedic texts were codified and classified into writings by the great sage, Veda Vyasa, as the following:

- Rig-Veda (wisdom of verses)
- Yajurveda (wisdom of sacrificial formula)
- Samveda (wisdom of chants)
- Atharvaveda (wisdom of Atharvan rituals)

This paper highlights the importance of plants from religious, cultural, ritualistic and economic point of view. Visnudharmottara Purana describes that by offering flowers to God, one gets blessings and leads propitious, prosperous and auspicious life. Offering flowers to deities also results in better fortune, glory, supremacy, and happiness of mind. In Sanskrit language Plant (वृक्ष) is वृक्षति वृक्ष वरणे पचाद्यच्च वृश्च्यते वा ओकश्च च्छेदने अक् इति ¹

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¹ Vrksayurveda, p. 12

Plants are two type's in Sanskrit Literature i.e (1) वानस्पत्यः (2) वनस्पतिः। "वानस्पत्यः फलैः पुष्पात् तैरपुष्पाद् वनस्पतिः"। पुष्पाज्जातैः फलैः उपलम्भितो वृक्षो वानस्पत्यः । एकम् आम्रादेः। अपुष्पात् पुष्पं विना जातेफलैः उपलक्षितो वृक्षो वनस्पतिः। एकं पनसोदुम्बरादिद्रुममात्रेऽपि वनस्पतिः² Plants are significant part of nature. They have been described in Sanskrit Literature as part and parcel of human civilization and have played vital role in almost all spheres of human life. According to Indian tradition plants are not only important ingredient of nature, but the existence of world sans plant kingdom is also impossible. Life cannot run smoothly without them. From time immemorial plants provide foods cloths medicines and many other things indispensable for survival and prosperity.

- **Ecological and environmental importance:** Plants have been integral part of life and culture. Owing to its importance in day to day human life and environmental balance, ancient seers of India did all that was possible to conserve and preserve plants. They developed the concept of tree worship apart from discussing the merits of plantation. As plants are required for healthy environment, thoughts for plants conservation were given prominence in ancient India. If those thoughts were practised in modern era too, problem of environmental pollution could easily be met. For promoting conservation of plants, our ancient seers and poets developed a unique idea of tree worship. This aspect was given prominent in ancient India.
- **Sacredness of plants:** As regards plantation and celebration of tree festivals, it is noted that a wise man who performed certain prescribed rites, obtains all his desires (*Matsyapurana*, 59.16). He who plants a tree, would live in heaven. He attains the great prosperity without any rebirth. The trees alone make a sonless person too have a son³. There are various *vratas* and festivals related to trees. Some of them named here such as Arkasaptami, Asokadvadasi, Asokapurnima, Amalakyekadasi, Kamalasaptami, Durvastami, Dhatrivrata.
- **Cultural Importance of Plants:** recognising the basic needs of human being, the ancient sages have been fourfold ideal to be striven for by everyone. This is called the Purusarthas or the ends to be striven of life. They are four; dharma, artha, kama, moksa. Plants are also related to this Purusarthas. *Vrkayurveda* says the trees should be carefully nurture through their shade, flowers, and fruits as they help immensely in the pursuit of dharma, artha and kama. अतो धर्मार्थकामाणां छायापुष्पफलादिभिः। प्रसाधकतमावृक्षा पालनीयाः प्रयत्नतः।⁴ Plants are always involved in well being of others. They yield fruits only for beneficence. Trees are like umbrella for those who suffer from scorching sun. They provide shade and bring happiness for the sufferers. The service of the trees in providing fire-wood, sticks for sacrifices like *agnihotra*, shade for the travellers to rest, nests for birds and medicine for men through the leaves, roots and barks is said to be its five sacrifices (*pancayajna*) इन्द्रनार्थं यदानीतमग्निहोत्रं तदुच्यते । छायाविश्रामपथिकैः पक्षिणां निलयेन च॥⁵.

- **Religious and Ritualistic Importance of Plants:** many of the plants are significant from religious and ritualistic point of view. Some of them are-
- **Amalaki:** It is well known for its ritualistic importance. *Padma Purana* says long life would be obtained by eating it; religious merit would be accumulated by drinking the juice of it, misfortune would be destroyed by taking a bath after applying its tenacious paste to one's *Vrksayurveda*, 98.

- *Varahapurana*.70-38-39
- *Padmapurana*1624
- *Skandapurana*,2.4.12.1
- *Siva Purana*,*Vidyasvara Samhita* 22.22
- (*Varahapurana*, 153.42)

Body; and one would get all prosperity भक्षणे च भवेदायुः पाने धर्मसञ्चयः । अलक्ष्मीनाशनं स्नाने सर्वैश्वर्यमवाप्नुयात्॥⁶. *Amalaki* is an excellent *Vaisnava* tree; one will get the benefit of making the gift of cows merely by remembering it. By seeing it one gets twice the benefit and eating its fruits three times the benefit⁷.

- **Bilva:** It is the embodiment of God Siva himself and is one of the sacred tree symbols of Hinduism. "The *bilva* tree is the form of *Mahadeva* (*Siva*) and it has been praised even by the Gods" महादेवस्वरूपोऽयं बिल्वो देवैरपिस्तुतः⁸.
- **Khadira:** *Varahapurana* discusses the significance of *Khadiravana* situated in Mathura. According to it one who visits *Khadiravana* in Mathura goes to the abode of Vishnu⁹.
- During *sraddha* ceremony three pits deserve to be created having three sticks of *khadira* wood¹⁰.
- **Tulasi:** Devotees who worship God, take the leaves of tulasi without fail. The *Skanda Mahapurana* suggests that one should worship Vasudeva with one thousand sprouts of tulasi leaves. It also adds that one who worships Hari and Hara with bunches of tulasi, is not reborn in any other womb. If a man worships with a pure, fragrant, and unbroken leaves of glorious tulasi, Yama wipes off the sin of that man. Worshipping Visnu by tulasi brings brightness, happiness, fame, wealth, noble family, good character, wife, son, daughter, wealth, kingdom, health, knowledge are in hand birth and after birth.
- **Asvattha:** *Sraddha* ceremony is related to our pitras and one has to perform rites and rituals related to this ceremony. According to the *Skanda Purana*, for the protection of pitras, an *asvattha* tree should be planted with a concentrated mind. It should be nourished like a son or King without any partiality. That *asvattha* should be joined in wedlock with *sami* tree.
- **Economic Importance of Plants:** when one talks about the Indian Culture, the role of four Purusarthas (dharma, artha, kama, moksa) in shaping the destiny of human being cannot be ruled out. Of these Purusarthas, artha has special significance as it is related to economic activities. Many of the industries are associated with plants with one way or the other.

⁶ *Padmapurana*1624

⁷ *Skandapurana*,2.4.12.1

⁸ *Siva Purana*,*Vidyasvara Samhita* 22.22

⁹ (*Varahapurana*, 153.42)

¹⁰ (*Vayu-mahapurana*, 74.9)

² *Srimadbhagavadpurana*

³ (*Padma Purana*-1.28.18-22)

⁴ *Vrksayurveda*, 98

⁵ *Varahapurana*.70-38-39

- **Garments:** Garmanet industries were quite advance stage in ancient India. Plants have major role in enriching the industry. *Vayu Purana* refers that plants have primary source of garment products. Another important Purana, *Vamana Purana* hints towards making garments from *karpasa*, *cinansuka* and *munja*. *Kurma Purana* states that 'mekhala' (a garment to cover waist and downwards) should be made with either 'munja' or 'kusa'. Garments made of 'karpasa' and 'kasayaka' have also been discussed in this *Purana*. It is worth mentioning that paste of *sveta* and *rakta candana* was used as cosmetic and bathing material in Puranic age¹¹.
- **Agriculture:** It is an important aspect related to plants and literature is replete with the references on *kr̥si*. Vedic seers knew that agriculture was the only option for food security. The agriculture has been the chief source of livelihood to people in India. Agriculture depends on many factors like soil, farmers, seeds, farming techniques, agricultural implements, irrigation, manures, etc. In Puranas, the agriculture was considered to be the best among all occupations, as it was basis of leading the life with happiness and prosperity.
- To our vedic knowledge, there are innumerable importance of plants like- as early as in the Rig-Veda, Vanaspati is addressed as "the lord of the trees". In India Plants and Trees are worshipped till date, Indian's history encompasses this idea since the Vedas were scripted. From amongst the four vedas: The Rig-veda, the Yajurveda, the Samaveda and the Atharvaveda. Mostly the Rig-Veda and Atharvaveda trace the history of plants and its uses, since the ancient civilization.
- **Conservation of plants in vedic period:** Some plants mentioned in Vedic literature are known with the same name even today and are under continuous utility since that period. Their therapeutic values are boundless and amazing. As all these plants are native to our country they are available readily in our near vicinity. Many plants have been mentioned in the Vedic literature. Various ancient written records, in the form of manuscripts, are available in Sanskrit and several other Indian languages. Sanskrit literature includes the Vedas, the Upanisada and epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The common literature available includes prose, poetry and drama of a number of Sanskrit authors like Kalidasa, Magha and Bhavabhuti, in whose works the information on plants is incidental and given by way of comparison. Technical literature on medicinal plants with complete detail of morphology and pharmacology is described in the works like the Caraka-Samhita and Susruta Samhita, A lot of indications of morphology of plants are traced in the Vedic literature. In the Taittirīyasaṃhitā, the parts of plants are eulogized viz. root (mūla), shoot (tūla), stem (kāṇḍa), twig (valśa), branch (śākhā), leaf (pāṇa), flower (puspa) and fruit (phala). The Vājasaneyīsamhitā and the Atharvaveda also mention about the physiology of plants. According to the Vājasaneyīsamhitā, yajña is performed for improving the roots, branches of forest trees, flowers, fruits and herbs. The Rgveda classifies the plants in the following heads viz. Fruitful (phalīnah), blossoming (puṣpavatī), having flowers (prasūvarīh), grass (tṛṇa) etc. The Atharvaveda also mentions various classifications of plants. In one mantra of this Veda, the following

classification is found, those rich in flowers (pus pavatī), those rich in shoots (prasūmatī), those rich in fruits (phalīnī) and those lacking fruits (aphalā). Another classification of tree is also seen in this Veda. The same Veda again classifies trees as those that are expand (prastr natih), those that are bushy (stambīnih), those having only one sheath (ekasun gah), those that creep (pratānavatīh), those having many stalks (An gsumatīh), are knotty or joined (kāṇḍ īnih) or those that have spreading branches (viśākhāh). In another place of the Atharvaveda, a special classification of trees are made on the basis of colour of trees like brown (babru), white (śukra), red (rohinī), spotted (pr̥ṣṇī), black (kṛṣṇa), swarthy (asiknī). Besides these, some other special classifications of plants are also made in the Vedas. These are the forest tree (vanaspati), fruit tree with conspicuous flowers (vānaspati or vṛkṣa), the herb (osadhi) and plant (vīrudha).

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, I observed that the plants have innumerable roles in different fields. At the very beginning we come to know that the trees provide foods, oxygen shade, fuel and wood. So, they should be produced, protected, and donated to the society. Multiple utilities of plants have been realised from times immemorial and these makes the plants as one of the oldest forms of adoration. Hence, plants are considered as holy. Without trees there would be no life on the earth. Just as man is considered as the highest in an animal kingdom, indeed tree is the highest and noblest production of plant kingdom. Trees always provides freshness, variety and often grandeur to the scene, whether they stand solitary or arranged in masses or avenues.

To the Puranas, trees have played a vital role in the field of human welfare and they are doing it even now. They shall be playing an important role so long the human life exists on the face of the earth. Plants have been an integral part of Indian life and culture. Owing to its importance in day to day human life and environment balance, ancient seers of India did all that was possible to conserve and preserve plants. Cutting of trees were considered as sin and hazardous have been discussed in ancient Sanskrit literature.

Plants too have multifarious roles in Vedas; in this paper it has mentioned the significance of plants in different Vedas; Rig-Veda, Yajurveda, Samveda are collectively known as Vedatrayi and Atharva Veda is considered as a later addition. Different Vedas shows different roles of plants, herbs, shrubs with different properties.

Among the four Vedas; Rig-Veda is the earliest literary record of the whole Aryan race. The Rig-Veda contains mostly adorations of gods, love of nature is one of the prominent feature in the poetry of Rig-Veda. The Vedic people lived in close proximate of nature. With trees, plants and shrubs the familiarity and association of man were the most intimate and friendly. According to RgVeda the sky, the earth, and the life are nothing but the by-products of plants. Plants serve in many ways; they are primarily the sources of food, energy, cloth, shelter and medicines. Beside these the ancient people depended on plants for making various agriculture and sacrificial appliances, vessels, furniture, different types of vehicles and for their aesthetic value. Plants are not only the useful objects but also they were revered and worshiped as gods or their abodes. The wood Ausadhi occurs at several places in Rig-Veda in the sense of plant or herbs especially medicinal herb while the term Virudh is also found

¹¹ (*Vamana Purana*, 51.64, 67.36)

to be used in the sense of plant in the Rig-Veda and in later in Rig-Veda trees are classified as phalini (bearing fruits), aphala (not bearing fruits), apuspa (devoid of flowers) and puspini (having flowers). In Ayurveda, the root of puskara has been used for cardiac disorders, bronchial asthma, cough, and chest pain. Vetasa was included in the group of calamus rotang or a similar reed. It was elastic, hence chairs, baskets, sacrificial thrones and shafts of bows were made of it.

In Yajurveda, it describes different types of plant species and there significant usages in various rituals as magical and medicinal importance and in manufacturing the yajna implements. The vedic medicine is mingled with magic. Mere use of herbs, without the recitation of mantras is not found in vedic texts. Thus, it has seen that the plants have got four kinds of significances: ritualistic, magical, medicinal and secular. The plants, with their four fold significance, not only become the most essential part of the ritual, but also boost up the practical benefit derived from a ritual.

In Atharvaveda it has mentioned that the entire herbs and plants go long way in solving health problem of all human being. Vedic people use medicinal herbs and plant to treat various diseases. At present such a cure is known as Ayurvedic treatment, which was actually developed in vedic era. There are no any aspects of herbs and plants which have not been scientifically described in Vedas. From the above description it is observed that the more in vedic age were realized the significance of plants in nature and they utilized them for their various needs.

Our modern scientists were realized the place of herbs, trees, grass and creepers in the ecosystem. The ecosystem mainly depends upon the plants. Our scientific explosion and the gradual development of it did not consider a first place of plants in ecology. But they now recognized the plants agnum bonum of the humanity. All the creatures of the earth depend on the plants in direct and indirect way for their existence. Plants have an important roles to control weather and equilibrium on the nature before the development of modern science, our ancestors were realised the different uses of plants. They considered them as the bestowers of life. Since, they revered and worshiped some plants as gods. So, they preserved and loved the plants than that of their family members. Another important wonder they did is that, the roles of plants in the physical health hygiene, exactly 4000 years before. This awareness laid the foundation of Ayurveda through later Vedic literature i.e., Yajur, Sama, and Atharva. Hence, Ayurveda is considered as fifth Veda.

The wide deforestation invites many environmental problems throughout our planet. Negative drawbacks of this constant exploitation of the nature led man into nature. This awareness compelled the modern man to follow the age old rule of 'Live and let live'. Vanamahotsava, social forestry and the protection of environment is the product of positive idea of modern era. For the better future we would preserve plants and led a life without struggle towards our friendly ecosystem.

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