

Over-religious Activity, a Threat to Biodiversity: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT Plants are worshiped, but simultaneously are equally tortured. A case study of an Aamlakam plant (*Phyllanthus emblica*) worshiped in a temple premises reveals the truth.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Gooseberry plant is known as Aamlakam / Dhatri / Amrutaphalla is Sanskrit with a local name Anla in Odia, Amlaki – Bengali, Amla – Hindi and Usirikai in Telugu language. Its botanical name is *Phyllanthus emblica* comes under the family Euphorbiaceae. The plant is also significant from Astro-ethnobotanical point of view as its sustainable maintenance neutralises certain astrological negative effects (Dash and Padhy 2015). The Aamlakam fruit is enriched with medicinal property. Aayurveda has identified its medicinal utility against more than forty ailments. Significantly it works for heart problems and diabetes.

From religious point of view Aamlakam plant is worshiped as Goddess Laxmi – the power of wealth, beauty, nature, production and fostering. In Odisha state, India a specific day ‘Anla Navami’ is earmarked in the Hindu calendar month ‘Kaartika’ to offer the leaves and fruits of Aamlakam plant to Sri Jagannath, Sri Mahalaxmi and other God and Goddess. In the next following month ‘Maargasira’ four Thursdays (*Bruhaswati Bara*) are dedicated to worship goddess Laxmi in each and every Odia family irrespective of caste, creed and financial status. Moreover, in *Tantra* philosophy it is mentioned that, whoever he may be, if he offers the leaves of Aamlakam to goddess Laxmi daily for fifteen days in the month of ‘Aassweena’ till the full moon day, he wins a lot of money through gambling. The ‘Aassweena’ full moon day is named

as *Kumara Poorneemaa* (a day devoted for youngsters) is the birth day of Goddess Laxmi.

With so much of Medicinal, Astrological and Spiritual importance the Aamlakam plant is worshiped in the house premises of many families along with Tulasi (*Ocimum sanctum*). It is also placed in the temple compounds for public worship. The way the plant is worshiped, behaved and tortured in a temple premises is reflected in the Figure 1.

The Vedic age Indians are pioneer to record that plants have feeling of pleasure and pain (Dash and Padhy 1997). Further work by Sir J.C. Bose (1924) has elaborated this Vedic concept. The secret life of plants revealed by Tompkins and Bird (1973) has scientifically established their apparent mental capabilities, ability to perceive and respond to human thought, expression of emotion and sentiment to distinct traumatic events like injury or death of other organisms and response to prediction of earthquakes and storms. Under such circumstance, if a plant is tied with red ribbons from bottom upto 95 percent of its body, ornamented with bangles and sacred threads and decorated with vermilion (contains Mercuric sulphide) in the name of worship (Fig. 1); what sort of blessings can be expected from the concern living legend? Its freedom, growth, respiration and photosynthesis is forcefully arrested. Conceptually, it must be throwing blames instead of blessings. Tie-up of coloured cloth / thread pieces to different auspicious plants (Aamba, Anla, Bara, Bella, Dimiri, Pippala, Tulasi etc.) in a specific period of the year (‘Phalguna’ month: *Budha Astami* to *Poornimaa*) to fulfil any particular desire (*Maanashika*) is recommended in Astrology. But it is also advised, to make the plant free from the bondage after the fulfilment of the desire and sacrifice the cloth piece in flowing water.

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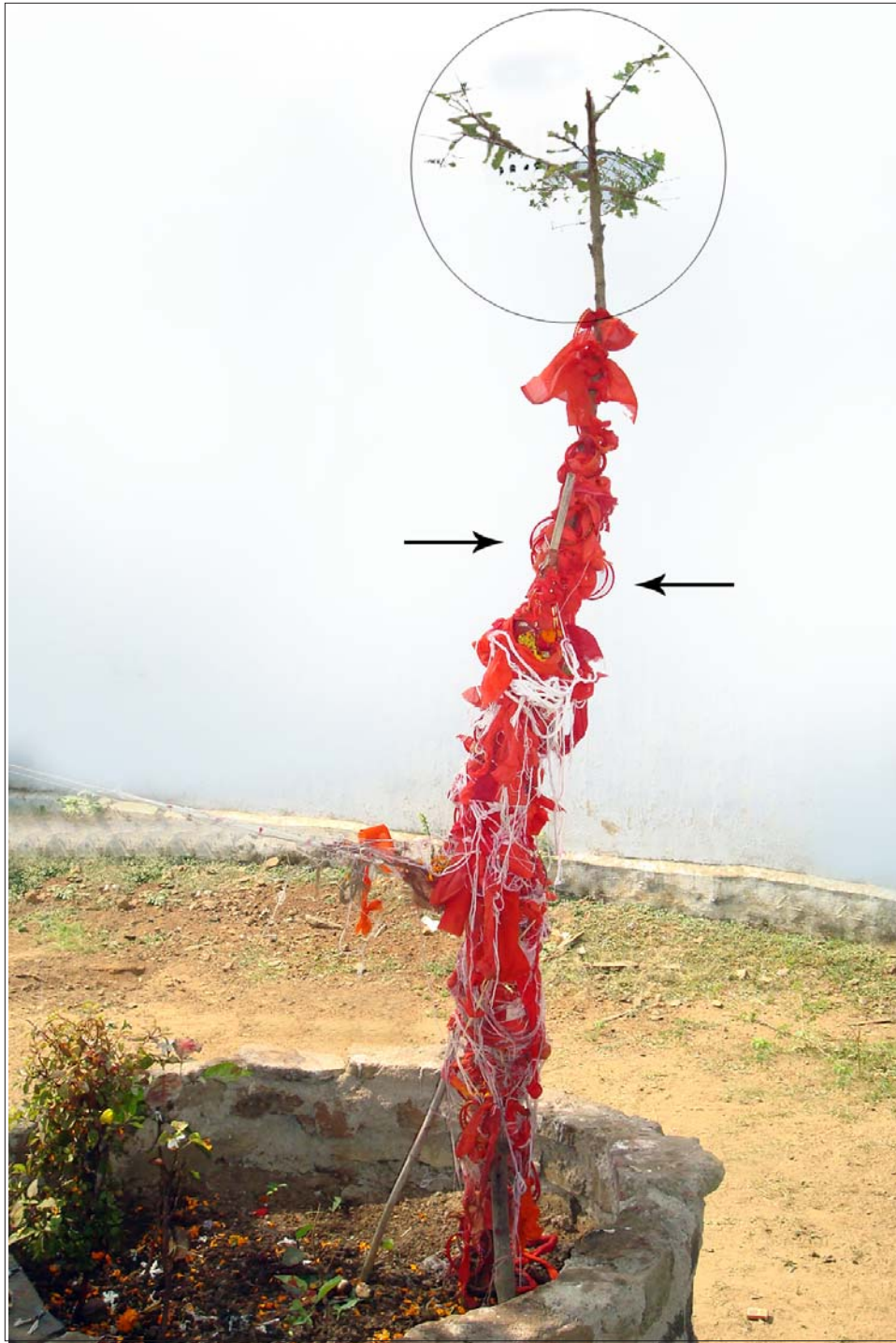


Fig. 1. An Amlakam plant is worshiped in a temple premises, Berhampur Odisha (→ Bangles)

More to add, for the Thursday worship of 'Maargasira' month to Goddess Laxmi, truck-loads of Aamlakam plant parts comes to the town areas for religious business. Rural people with the expectation of earning little money, come with huge amount of different plant products necessary for worship of different God and Goddess and open their temporary shops along the road sides. At last if they fail to pursue their business the plant products are thrown to the city drains. This show is repeated on and often before any religious event throughout the year chronologically: Sri Saraswati Puja, Maha Siva Ratri, Sri Ganesh Puja, 'Mahalayaa' (*Pitru Puja*), 'Dasahara' (*Durga Puja*), 'Garvana Sankranti' (Paddy plant is worshiped), 'Deepabali' (*Pitru Puja*) and four Thursdays of 'Maargasira' (Goddess Laxmi is worshiped) and many other days. On the other hand, the town inhabitants instead of offering an essential amount of leaf or flower to their worshiping deities, load them with branches and twigs, because of cheap availability. No one bothers for the wastage of biodiversity in the name of religious magnanimity. Man, the supreme being, should take care of the animal and plant kingdom as the guardian of nature. *Ahimsa* – should equally be extended to plants, not for animals only (Padhy 1999, 2014).

Sri Krishna teaches the conservation philosophy through minimum consumption in Gita (Padhy 2014):

*"I will accept any gift,
a fruit, a flower, a leaf, even water,
If it is offered purely, and devoutly, with
love"* (Gita: 9/26)

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