

Biodiversity in Folk-Beliefs and Practices Among the Tribals of Rajasthan

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INTRODUCTION

The Aravalli ranges especially at its southern and South-western portions supports mainly dry-deciduous forests and is the home of the major tribal populations of the State viz Bhil, Bhil-Meena, Meena, Garasia, Damor and Kathodi.

Magico-religious sphere has attracted attention of several workers. Chandalia (1992) published a paper on Bhil mythology regarding environment and religious faiths. Mann (1978) and Ojha (1962) gave notes on folk-deities, religious customs, rites and rituals in the Bhil tribe. Workers who published their works on religious faith and practices connected with various plants are Desai (1964)- Gujarat, Enthoven (1930)- western India, Jain (1963)- Madhya Pradesh, Gupta (1971)- India. Some workers have conducted such studies in Rajasthan also, which are either area/tribe specific or confined to a particular fraction of subject or scantily informative and do not present an exhaustive scenario of magico-religion and flora associated (Joshi, 1995; Joshi et al., 1994; Khandelwal, 1997; Sebastian and Bhandari, 1984 and Singh and Pandey, 1982).

The fauna and flora of these regions enjoy functional and spiritual importance among the tribal societies as their plant/animal deities, totems, providing habitat for their shrines, material for their offerings and rites and rituals.

Animal deities are also worshipped some times with a conviction that their appeasement would provide protection from the representatives associated, e.g. "Vagh deo" (tiger deity), "Nag deo" (snake deity), other deities are "Mahi mata" (river goddess), "Magra bavsi" (hill god), "Bhairav", "Baba deo" etc.

METHODOLOGY

The authors are engaged in ethnobiological studies among the tribal and traditional communities of North-West India. By field surveys in these areas they have studied the floral interac-

tions in almost all feasible facets of tribal lives. During studies undertaken information on the role of plants in the tribal magico-religious beliefs and practices was also gathered which is presented here.

Gods, Goddesses and Deities

Gods, Goddesses and deities of the tribals are countless and most of them are common to all the tribes, while some of them are simply worshipped as guardians some are ascribed as having specific roles e.g. Bhumia and Hirkulio: Agriculture, Vaijwa: physical deformities, Meghraj and Inderdeo: Rains and lighting; Nanderdeo: Corn, Matnyo deo: Vegetables, Magra Bavasi: Hills, Toranyo: Village boundaries etc. Plants too are held sacred and worshipped as deities, some important examples hereunder will elucidate.

1. *Adansonia digitata* Linn. (Kalpa dev)

This tree is acclaimed universally as a wish fulfilling deity. Two trees are existing near Banswara on the bank of river Mahi. Tribal people desirous of getting married or getting child, for fulfilment of wishes or with newly born babies in anticipation of getting long life conferred on them, circle around the tree tying thread on the trunk and pouring offerings. Vows taken are also kept this way.

2. *Ficus benghalensis* Linn. (Vadla)

As in Hindu societies this tree is worshipped by the tribals also.

3. *Ficus religiosa* Linn. (Pipali, Pipli Mata)

The tree is taken as a female deity unlike Hindus who take it as a male one. If growing near the hut it may be transplanted elsewhere but destroying it is considered a sin. During the day of "Dasha Mata" celebration (in the month March) womenfolk move around the tree five times and tie a thread around its trunk. A story

(Katha) is used to narrate by the priest while a drummer drums nearby. A thread given by the priest is worn as a "dora".

4. *Mangifera indica* Linn. (Amba)

At Ghotia Amba (a pilgrim spot) in Banswara district tribals worship this mango tree believed to have been planted by Bhim of the Pandavas during their exile period to please the Inderdeo-the god of rains. A two days fair is held in March when tribals congregate at this spot, bathe the trunks of the ancient mango trees, apply turmeric (*Curcuma domestica* Linn.) paste and offer coconuts (*Cocos nucifera* Linn.), incense sticks and coins.

5. *Musa paradisiaca* Linn. (Keli, Kela)

This plant is associated with Aryan rituals too. The plant is believed to prosper only under strict taboos and codes of worship. Persons with form of pollution e.g. in drunken state, women in menses etc. are forbidden to go in its proximity.

6. *Phyllanthus emblica* Linn. (Amli, Anwla)

Valia Bhil, later known as the great celebrated saint Valmiki who used to loot and murder of travellers and took a piece of their flesh which he stored in bins. When his crimes amounted to a big magnitude that seven earthen bins filled with pieces of human flesh God came to intervene. On asking how he could achieve salvation he was told to take seven circles around the emblica tree. Even today Bhils seeking absolution do the same.

7. *Tamarindus indica* Linn. (Amli, Imli)

Singh and Pandey (1982) report the worship of the tamarind tree on the day of "Amli-gyaras". Young boys and girls take seven rounds of a twig of this tree planted on the ground, offering maize and millet grains on it. They collect some of the grain later storing them in grainary in their homes under belief that the bins will never be empty.

8. *Vetiveria zizanioides* (Linn.) Nash (Kator Mata)

This perennial grass grows in marshy and wet habitats, is believed as the abode of Kator goddess responsible for safety and welfare of the

children. On a day in the month of September the weeds are worshipped and food cooked a day earlier is eaten.

Place of Worship and Allied Functionaries

The most important place associated with sacred nature in the tribal villages is the "Devra" where the deity is housed. There may be more than one deity at a "Devra". It may be an elaborate construction or a raised square platform often below an auspicious tree like *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss., *Ficus benghalensis* Linn., *Ficus religiosa* Linn. etc. Generally, the land left aside for the deity and devra supports a grove of old, large and well preserved trees where cutting of trees even plucking a twig is considered a blasphemy. This stand or sacred grove is known as a "Maalvan" and may comprise of a single or many plant species. The most common ones are *Butea monosperma* (Lam.) Taub., *Ficus* spp., *Diospyros melanoxylon* Roxb., *Boswellia serrata* Roxb. ex Colebr., *Mangifera indica* Linn., *Musa paradisiaca* Linn., *Jasminum sambac* (Linn.) Ait and *Tectona grandis* Linn. f.

Just next to the village chief in importance is the village priest or "Bhopa"- the magico-religious specialist. An assistance of a "Kotwal", "Punjara" and "Hajuria" is available to the Bhopa. A newly trained Bhopa along with his mentor has to master his supernatural practices in the cremation ground or below certain trees like *Ficus benghalensis* Linn., *Ficus religiosa* Linn. and *Tamarindus indica* Linn.

Totem and Taboo

At times the primitive man established identity with the animate (plants and animals) or inanimate (land, hill, river, celestial objects) elements of nature. This was the formation of a clan identified with the totem which was regarded superstitious reverence. The relationship was intimate- of a mystical, reverential and kinship kind. The totem was ascribed a guardian role to the clan and commemorated with rituals and worship. Rigid restrictions and avoidances came to be associated with the totem i.e. the *totemic taboos*.

Totemism is observed among all the tribes. Nearly a hundred clans of the Bhil tribe were studied by Doshi (1971) and Jain (1973). Some

of the clans together with plant based totems are listed in table 1.

Table 1: Plants in Bhil Totems

S.No.	Botanical Name	Totem Plant Clan	
1.	<i>Aegle marmelos</i> (Linn.) Corr.	Bel, Beel	Bilwal
2.	<i>Borassus flabellifer</i> Linn.	Tad	Tad
3.	<i>Butea monosperma</i> (Lam.)Taub.	Khakhra	Bhagora
4.	<i>Butea monosperma</i> (Lam.)Taub.	Palas	Palasia
5.	<i>Carissa congesta</i> Wt.	Karmada, Karmadi	Maieda
6.	<i>Cochlospermum religiosum</i> (Linn.) Alst.	Ganiyar	Ganawa
7.	<i>Cordia gharaf</i> (Forsk.) Ehrenb. & Asch.	Gundi	Gunadia
8.	<i>Dalbergia paniculata</i> Roxb.	Barbet	Barbetia
9.	<i>Dendrocalamus strictus</i> (Roxb.) Nees.	Bans	Dangi, Masania
10.	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> Linn.	Peepal, Peepli	Ninama, Rathod
11.	<i>Helicteres isora</i> Linn.	Atedi	Dindor
12.	<i>Lagenaria siceraria</i> Standl.	Tumba, Tumbi	Bhuria
13.	<i>Mitragyna parvifolia</i> (Roxb.) Korth.	Kalam	Kanwi
14.	<i>Papaver somniferum</i> Linn.	Amal, Post	Amaliar
15.	<i>Paspalum scrobiculatum</i> Linn.	Kodra	Meena
16.	<i>Phyllanthus emblica</i> Linn.	Amla, Amli	Anwala
17.	<i>Piper betel</i> Linn.	Pan	Kalaara
18.	<i>Saccharum benghalense</i> Retz.	Munj	Munjia
19.	<i>Soyimida febrifuga</i> (Roxb.) Juss.	Rohin	Rohan, Rohinia
20.	<i>Syzygium cumini</i> (Linn.) Skeels	Jambu, Jamun	Jamonia
21.	<i>Trapa natans</i> Linn. var. <i>bispinosa</i> Roxb. Makino	Hingada	Hingoda

Generally, the totems are associated with mythical legends, e.g.

1. Masania Clan

An ancestor in dire necessity was compelled to cook his food on cremation fire with the help of a bamboo (*Dendrocalamus strictus*).

2. Hingoda Clan

Hingodas migrated from water pools and tanks where Hingada (*Trapa natans* var. *bispinosa*) thrived.

3. Kanwi Clan

During a marriage an old Bhil in terror climbed a *Mitragyna parvifolia* tree and looked here and there in panic like a monkey. The bride's friends teased him as a Kanwi and thence the clan originated.

4. Dodigar clan

Even parts of plants can also be totems e.g. Dodigar clan is associated with cobs of maize (*Dodi* = Cob). This is prevalent elsewhere too (Majumdar, 1961).

It has been seen that most of the plant totems are trees. The totem is revered and feared. It is held sacred and worshipped on various occasions to avert disasters. Leave aside cutting and burning of the material of the totem tree even stepping upon it is strictly tabooed. The edible material when totems, are not eaten by the associated clan e.g. food grain (Kodra) or fruits (e.g. Amla, Bel, Gundi, Hingara, Jamun, Karamadi, Peepli, Tumba) or leaves (e.g. Pan) are not eaten by Meena, Anwala, Bilwal, Gunadia, Hingoda, Jamania, Maieda, Rathod/Ninama and Bhuria clans respectively. Women sometimes veil themselves before the totem.

Evil Eye or "Najar"

The evil eye phenomenon is one of the most dreaded faith in the tribal societies. This is the act practiced by an enemy, an ill-wisher, a witch or an inadvertant act of a jealous person. The attractive health of a male, beauty of a female, smiles of a charming child, happy and prosperous state of a family, much lushing crop or a tree, much more milk giving cattle may be drastically "affected by an evil eye". Several preventive and curative measures are prescribed by the Bhopa. Some of which are:

PREVENTIVE

1. A root piece of *Acacia leucophloea* (Roxb.) Willd. or *Dichrostachys cinerea* (Linn.) Wt. & Arn. is placed between the bamboo chips of a cradle of an infant.
2. *Abrus precatorius* Linn. seed amulets are worn by the adults.

3. A wood chunk of *Anogeissus latifolia* (Roxb. ex DC) Wall ex Guill. & Perr. is hung from the neck of cattle.

CURATIVE

1. *Solanum surattense* Burm. f. root is collected with specific ritual. The root is given crushed with fresh unwarmed milk of a black goat to the child victim affected with "Najar". This has a purgative effect and the distended abdomen and dazed mental condition are also cured.
2. The crushed root bark of *Ichnocarpus frutescens* (Linn.) R. Br. is mixed in water, filtered and a bath is given with this water which "washes away" the evil eye.
3. The root of *Mucuna pruriens* (Linn.) DC. is given crushed with milk to a child victim with abnormally distended abdomen. The ailment is cured following vomitings.
4. A lemon (*Citrus medica* Linn.) is split into four quarters. Two strips of red cloth are passed diagonally through the cuts. After adding vermilion it is moved round before the face of a victim and either set adrift in a water-body, enclosing it in a vessel or buried in the earth.
5. Crushed root of fresh sapling of *Acacia leucophloea* (Roxb.) Willd. is applied on forehead, near nose and eyes to "breather away" the evil-eye effect.

The "Jhada" Ritual

This thereby given to a victim of physical as well as psychic problems. For cure of the problems the Bhopa enjoy immense faith in the tribal society. In a *Jhada* act the victim sits before the Bhopa who taking bird feathers or plant twigs moves them up and down before the person alongwith chanting "mantras" in an atmosphere of mystery, magic and incense. Snake bites, ailments like fever or long standing diseases, possession by spirits etc. are reported to be cured by *Jhada* act. The common plants met with being used in the *Jhada* ritual are as follows:

Ailanthus excelsa Roxb. (leaves), *Anisomeles indica* Kuntze (twigs), *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss. (twigs), *Calotropis procera* (Ait.) R. Br. (twigs), *Cucurbita moschata* Duch. ex Poir. (fruits), *Cuscuta reflexa* Roxb. (stem), *Ficus*

benghalensis Linn. (twigs), *Ficus religiosa* Linn. (leaves), *Phoenix sylvestris* Roxb. (frond), *Ricinus communis* Linn. (leaf) and *Vitex negundo* Linn (twigs).

There must be some reasons why these particular plants have been taken for *Jhada* ritual e.g. a peculiar odour, presence of certain substance, characteristic form or size of leaves, easy and proximal availability or because of their magico-religious significance associated.

Other Beliefs and Practices

The number of these beliefs and practices innolving plants is a great many. Some chosen examples are given hereunder.

1. It is believed that *Calotropis procera* (Ait.) R. Br., *Ficus benghalensis* Linn. and *Ficus religiosa* Linn. if allowed to grow in the hut compound would cause quarrels in a family or with neighbours.
2. Using mattersses floss stuffed with plumed seeds of *Bombax ceiba* Linn. would cause paralysis.
3. Women folk in pregnancy are prohibited to go in the proximity of certain plants under fear of their being association with evil spir-its e.g. *Calotropis procera* (Ait.) R. Br. and *Tamarindus indica* Linn.
4. *Cassia fistula* Linn. pods are kept below pillow while sleeping to stop regular night-mares. This practice was found to be prevalent not only in the tribal regions but throughout Rajasthan as well.
5. In case of difficult parturition, in the hairdo of the pregnant woman a root piece of *Echinops echinatus* Roxb. is kept for facilitating parturition. This root piece is removed immediately after delivery. A delay in removal may results in the prolapsus of uteri.
6. A charm of leaves of *Enicostemma hyssopifolium* (Willd.) Verd. is tied on the arm for curing fevers.
7. In cough and cold or sore throat a fruit of *Solanum indicum* Linn. is tied to the neck of the child victim under belief that the cure is effected as the fruit dries.

DISCUSSION

Studies (including fifty three plant species)

indicate tribal society's deep rooted animistic faiths and totemic concepts mingled with a high level of superstition, inspite of contact with Hindu religion and infiltration of missionaries in their territories. Though, having imbibed several traits- even the gods, goddesses and deities, the matrix of tribal religion has been the one that the influence of acculturation have least affected. As is clear from the above account that the fabric of tribal religion is woven with the elements of physical environment - the ambient flora and fauna that surrounds them. Perhaps, owing to their common environment there are startling similarities between the religions of the various tribes co-existing.

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KEY WORDS Magico-religion. Plants. Rajasthan.

ABSTRACT Rajasthan has 54.74 lac tribal population forming 12.44% of the State's total population, spread over mainly eight districts namely Alwar, Banswara, Baran, Chittorgarh, Dungarpur, Sawai Madhopur, Sirohi and Udaipur. Most of the tribal populations harboured on the Aravalli hill ranges clad with forests of dry deciduous nature. Several tribes inhabit the hilly and neighbouring plain regions of the area. Important ones of them are the Bhil, Meena, Bhil-Meena, Garasia, Damor, Sahariya and Kathodi. The present communication surveys the role of ambient flora in the magico-religious sphere in vogue among the tribal communities of the State.

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APPENDIX

List of plants (excluding those which are enumerated in table I which figures in tribal magico-religion

S.No.	Botanical Name	Local Name
1.	<i>Abrus precatorius</i> Linn.	Chanotri, Chirmi, Ratti
2.	<i>Acacia leucophloea</i> (Roxb.) Willd.	Renjhua, Rinjhua, Ronjh
3.	<i>Adansonia digitata</i> Linn.	Kalpa Dev
4.	<i>Ailanthus excelsa</i> Roxb.	Adu, Adusa, Pava
5.	<i>Anisomeles indica</i> (Linn.) O. Kntze.	Gubra, Phoongio
6.	<i>Anogeissus latifolia</i> (Roxb. ex DC) Wall ex Guill & Perr.	Dhaoda, Dhaora
7.	<i>Azadirachta indica</i> A. Juss.	Leemda, Leemra
8.	<i>Bombax ceiba</i> Linn.	Hemal, Himbal, Semal
9.	<i>Boswellia serrata</i> Roxb. ex colebr.	Salar
10.	<i>Calotropis procera</i> (Ait.) R. Br.	Aak, Aakda
11.	<i>Cassia fistula</i> Linn.	Karmala, Karmela
12.	<i>Citrus medica</i> Linn.	Lembu, Limbu
13.	<i>Cocos nucifera</i> Linn.	Nariyal
14.	<i>Cucurbita moschata</i> Duch. ex Poir.	Kaula
15.	<i>Curcuma domestica</i> Linn.	Halad, Harad
16.	<i>Cuscuta reflexa</i> Roxb.	Amarbel
17.	<i>Dichrostachys cinerea</i> (Linn.) Wt. & Arn.	Eemna
18.	<i>Diospyros melanoxylon</i> Roxb.	Temru, Timranna, Timru, Tendu
19.	<i>Echinops echinatus</i> Roxb.	Oont Kanteli
20.	<i>Enicostemma hyssopifolium</i> (Willd.) Verd.	Naame, Nav, Navli
21.	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i> Linn.	Vadla
22.	<i>Ficus</i> spp.	
23.	<i>Mangifera indica</i> Linn.	Amba
24.	<i>Mucuna pruriens</i> (Linn.) DC.	Kamach, Kaimach, Kaivach

Appendix 1: Contd....

S.No.	Botanical Name	Local Name
25.	<i>Musa paradisiaca</i> Linn.	Kela, Keli
26.	<i>Jasminum sambac</i> (Linn.) Ait.	
27.	<i>Phoenix sylvestris</i> Roxb.	Khajur
28.	<i>Ricinus communis</i> Linn.	Endi, Indi, Erendi
29.	<i>Solanum indicum</i> Linn.	Dolri, Ringan, Jangli Ringan

Appendix 1: Contd....

S.No.	Botanical Name	Local Name
30.	<i>Solanum surattense</i> Burm. f.	Bhui Ringan, Pasar Kateli
31.	<i>Tamarindus indica</i> Linn.	Amla, Imli
32.	<i>Tectona grandis</i> Linn. f.	Hag, Sag
33.	<i>Vetiveria zizanioides</i> (Linn.) Nash.	Kator Mata
34.	<i>Vitex negundo</i> Linn.	Negad, Nigud

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