



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 5.2  
IJAR 2015; 1(2): 253-256  
www.allresearchjournal.com  
Received: 18-11-2014  
Accepted: 22-12-2014

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## Classification of plants and trees in Indian Puranas: A historical perspective

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### Abstract

Most of the educational phenomena contain large units. It is not possible to observe each unit of population under controlled conditions. Sometimes populations are so large that their study becomes time consuming. Sampling helps to reduce expenses, in terms of time, money effort and provide generalization on the basis of relatively small population. This paper discusses various types of samplings and their need in research process.

**Keywords:** educational phenomena, population

### Introduction

The present paper intends to study the classificatory system of Indian plants and trees in historical perspective. India has always been a land of nature worshipper that includes worship of plants and trees. The worship of plants and trees culminated in either giving certain plants divinity or classifying them as sacred to be used in worship of deities. Indians are also aware about their obligation to plants as they are very basis of life. There is no conduct of life where plants do not contribute in the form of food, fuel, shelter, fiber, fodder or medicine. Therefore plants and trees have very important place in life that was long ago recognized and cherished by Indians. A rudimentary form of classification of plants and trees can be found in the Vedas, the oldest composition by human beings. Historians assign c.1500-600 BC as time for the composition of the Vedas. There are four Vedas viz. Rigveda, Samveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda. All the Vedas mention about plants and trees. We can clearly find some basis for classification of plants and trees in Yajurveda and Atharvaveda. The Rigveda (1500-1000 BC) mentions about the healing properties of herbs which it call *drava* which is present in plants. The Yajurveda and the Atharvaveda (900-600 BC) classified plants on the basis of morphology.

या फलनीअर्याअफला अपुष्पा याश्चपुष्णी I  
वृहस्पति प्रसूतास्ता नो मुक्त्व हंसः II यजुर्वेद (12-19)

The hymns say that Brihaspati (the God of plants) created various types of plants. The types of plants according to the hymns are:

1. Apushpa- Non-flowering
2. Pushpini- Having flower
3. Aphala- Without fruits
4. Phalinirya- Having fruits

We find rudimentary forms of classification of plants in the Vedas, and the Atharvaveda classified plants on the basis of colour, size, nature, genesis, and medicinal values also. The clear and comprehensive classification of plants had been done in the Puranas which is the main thrust area of this paper.

### The Past Approaches

It is possible to understand the theoretical and historical interest in Indian plants and trees with special reference to Puranic literature on a number of levels. On the first level, a great

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deal of interest in Indian plants and trees was generated from the medieval period onwards. Nowhere is this trend more clear than in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries but as this overview will show, this is rooted in the chronicles of the Mughal emperors.

The literature also contains rare references to the sacred qualities of Indian plants and efforts were made in some cases to find their equivalents in Sanskrit treaties. On a second level, one may examine those writings which were more concerned with the social and cultural data that are contained in the Puranas. In most such writings, a specific Purana was analysed issue-wise in which the references to plants and trees were generally discussed. On a third level, one may try to analyse the more specialized books on plants, plant myths and traditions that came to be written on the basis of Pauranic references. The number of theoretical concerns related to puranic data of the sub-continental flora can surely be multiplied but those mentioned above taken together cover a major part of the literature on the subject and are likely to provide an understanding of the cross-currents of ideas that have been significant in building up a historiographical background for the classificatory system of Indian plants and trees.

Scholarly interest in Indian plants and trees has generally been regarded as forming an offshoot of colonial contact with the Indian subcontinent. P. N. Bose's section of the centenary Review of the Asiatic Society (1885, reprint 1986, Part III: 69) for instance noted as long ago as 1676. Henry Van Rheede, the Dutch Governor of Malabar had made a large collection of Indian plants through the agency of a Brahman. They were sent to Cochin, where they were figured and described in Latin. The work was published at Amsterdam in twelve folio volumes with seven hundred and ninety four plates in 1686-1703. We are also aware that even before Rheede's work in the 16<sup>th</sup> century several Portuguese botanists who travelled to India described Indian medicinal plants including Garcia da Orta and Cristophoras Acosta.

A perusal of medieval chronicles suggests that this type of interest, however antedated the period of colonial contact. In fact, the pride of place in this regard must be given to the Baburnama, containing the memoirs of Babur rightly described by M. S. Randhawa (1982, Volume II: 134) <sup>[1]</sup> as the "first book on the Natural History of India". This work mentions the plants that the Emperor saw in India (cf. Randhawa 1982, Volume II: 139-52) <sup>[1]</sup> and includes fruits such as the mango, plantain, tamarind, mahua, khirini on the one hand and hibiscus oleander, keora, chameli flowers on the other. Moreover, illustrations of many of these plants including oleander, orange, keora, jamun and kamrak are also contained in the 16<sup>th</sup> century copy of the Baburnama. Though in no sense does this memoir mention the sacred qualities that were undoubtedly endowed to some of this flora in traditional Brahmanical literature and practice in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, still it does mark the beginning of a systematic interest in the general subject of Indian plants. Many subsequent chroniclers of the Mughal period also discussed and elaborated on such data and at least one of them, Abul Fazl noted in this context that the Hindus worshipped the *Pipal* and *Bar* trees (cited in Randhawa, Volume II, 1982: 224) <sup>[1]</sup>. It is 19<sup>th</sup> century work that is more important in terms of a large scale generation of such data. Several strands are here. The literature describes floral data on

different parts of the country with sculptural and art evidence.

### Range of Plants and Trees: Quantitative Analysis

There about hundred types of plants and trees mentioned in the relevant Puranas. These include (a) flowers such as *Kamal* and *Gulab*, (b) flowering trees such as *Parijata* and *Palash*, (c) fruit bearing trees such as mango and *Jamun*, (d) leafy trees like *Asvattha*, *Sal*, and *Asoka*, (e) cereals like *Yava* and *Vrihi*, (f) pulses such as *Urad* and *Masoor*, (g) useful trees and plants including *Kapas*, *Nariyal* and *tala*, (h) vegetables like *Gajar*, *Lahsun*, and (i) grasses like *Durva* and *Kusa*. The numbers and types of plants vary from Purana to Purana. In this regard, it is important to try and ascertain how many of the plants in each Purana are mentioned only once as against those which recur. The following pattern may be suggested. There are 39 varieties in the Vayu Purana of which approximately 35 types are mentioned only once. Of these the twenty types of plants and trees find mention in the Vishnu Purana. There are fourteen occur only once in the text. There are just seven varieties of flora in the Kurma Purana, and only *Palash*, *Kamal* and *Vata* are mentioned more than once. In the Matsya Purana, there are as many as 45 kinds of plants and trees; of these thirtythree types are only referred to once in the text. There are twentytwo types are mentioned in the Markandeya Purana with about half occur more than once. There are thirtynine varieties find mention in the Bhagavata Purana with thirty mentioned only once in the text. Finally, in the Brahmamanda Purana, sixteen types of plants are mentioned and of these about nine varieties are mentioned more than once. The most substantial range of plants and trees seems to be in the Matsya Purana while the least only seven is in the Kurma Purana. From the tabulation of those data in Table 1, it would seem that the following would be recurring references percentage-wise in the Puranas:

**Table 1:** It would seem that the following would be recurring references percentage-wise in the Puranas

Vishnu Purana	30% of the references	6 out of 20 types
Vayu Purana	10.2% of the references	4 out of 39 types
Kurma Purana	42.8% of the references	3 out of 7 types
Matsya Purana	26.6% of the references	12 out of 45 types
Markandeya Purana	50% of the references	11 out of 22 types
Bhagavata Purana	50% of the references	9 out of 39 types
Brahmanda Purana	56.25% of the references	9 out of 16 types

### Recurring References to Plants and Trees

As Table 1 shows of the approximately hundred plants and trees that occur in the seven Puranas, only thirty types occur more than once. These are *Chandan*, *Palsha*, *Vata*, *Kamal*, *Parijat*, *Kaner*, *Shalmali*, *Ikh*, *Palash*, *Vrihi*, *Yava*, *Til*, *Kulathi*, *Jamun*, *Aam*, *Asvatha*, *Sarson*, *Dhan*, *Ashok*, *Aaka*, *Bela*, *Mandara*, *Nim*, *Kesar*, *Semal*, *Darbha*, *Bilva*, *Kadamba* and *Kusa*. However there are only four types of flora enumerated above where there are more than twenty references to a particular variety i.e. *Kamal*, *Kusa*, *Vatta* and *Chandan*. The largest number of allusions are of course to *Kamal* (134) with as many as 42 in the Matsya Purana and six in the Kurma Purana. Even though the number of references in the Kurma Purana may not relatively speaking seem very large, yet if we keep in mind that there are only 16 references (including the six relating to *Kamal*) to plants in this text and that there are only two other plants which are

referred to more than once – *Vata* (3) and *Palash* (2) - this number seems substantial. As for *Kusa* grass, there are twentyfour references on the whole with only one in the Vishnu Purana and about seven in the Vayu Purana. The references to *Vata* are twelve in the Vayu Purana and only two in the Vishnu Purana. As for *Chandana*, there are references with about seventeen in the Matsya Purana and only one in the Brahmanda Purana.

How many plants and trees in these Puranas are alluded to between ten to twenty times? These are just six types: *Parijata*, *Palash*, *Vrihi*, *Jamun*, *Asvattha*, and *Kadamba*. To put it another way, the thirty flora types are mentioned more than once in the seven Puranas, roughly 66.6% or 2/3<sup>rd</sup> the number (20) are referred to in less than ten places. Thus it can be said with some degree of certainty that only 10% of the plants and trees that are mentioned in these mentioned in these Maha Puranas (10 out of 100) are referred to in a quantitatively substantial manner.

**Problems and Possibilities in Categorising Plants and Trees: A Qualitative Analysis**

How can we classify and categorise the flora that occur again and again in the text? First of all these references

suggest that several of the plants and trees endowed with a sacred character. Then there are those that are integral to the description of particular qualities for instance, the eyes of Rakshasa Vidyudrupa in the Markandey Purana and the goddess Saraswati in the Matsya Purana. The goddess Parvati’s beauty compared to a *neelakamal* in the Kurma Purana as also the eyes of Vishnu in the Kurma and the Vishnu Purana. The Vishnu Purana also compared eyes of Brahma with *Kamal*. There is *Asvatta* in the Markandey Purana, which provides the analogy for the shaking body of Harishchandra. Use of *Parijata* flowers in the Vishnu Purana by Sachi, wife of Indra to highlight her beauty and in the same Purana the use of *Parijata* by the wives of the servants of the Kauravas.

Third, there are plants that are ritually important for example, *Vrihi* in the Markandeya Purana. It is mentioned in two places in this Purana that it should be used for *Sraddha* rituals and one of the references, interestingly enough mentions that this wild variety “*pitro ko santushta karta hai.*” Incidentally, the use of wild rice in rituals is as old as the Satapatha Brahmana. The following **Table 2** contains some plants and trees associated with rituals and living creatures:

**Table 2:** The following table contains some plants and trees associated with rituals and living creatures

Plant and Tree	Associated with
Kusa Grass	Taken by Rita-dhvaja in his marriage to Madalasa Used for seat in the performance of the Parvana Sraddha
Darbha Grass	Giving of a double quantity of it in Sraddha Ceremony The Pindas placed on it in the Sraddha Ceremony
Barley	Offering of it in the Sraddha Ceremony
Sesamum Seed	Offering of it in the Sraddha Ceremony Used in making sraddha pindas Scattered on the ground where the Sraddha Ceremony to be performed
Rice	Used in making sraddha pindas Found along with thorns, ant-hill, stones etc at the place where Yama’s messenger takes the evil man
Pipal Tree	Hriscandra’s trembling at Visvamitra’s rage compared to the leaf of the Pipal tree Clothes of a Brahmana in vanaprashtha Aashram
Coconut	Woman’s pregnant womb compared to it
Simul Tree	Bodies of sinners pieced on its long iron thorns The king should know the behaviour of Simmul tree seeds
Soma Plant	Soma, Anasuya’s son credited with its creation
Blue Water Lilly	The luster of Lakshmi’s eye compared with it Rati’s eyes compared with it
Vimba (Climber)	Rati’s lips compared to it since it bears a scarlet berry
Lotus	Eyes of Rakshasa Vidyudrupa described as bearing like lotus leaf Mouth of Hariscandra as described by his citizens Eyes of goddess Saraswati compared to it The king is expected to gather wisdom from the lotus flower The earth appeared as a lotus when lifted out by Vishnu as a boar

Then, plants are categorized with particular gods. *Kamal* is the residence of goddess Lakshmi in various references in the Vishnu Purana and in the same Purana, Brahma is also said to be born from *Kamal*. There are also those which are associated with stories of various kinds. Such categories can be multiplied.

At the same time, I would also like to state that while there are references which allow us to speak of a plant being a part of a well-defined associational group, it is also clear that even in many of such clear cut categories there are references that simply do not fit in and in some cases even militate against the general tenor of allusions. An instance in point is that of *Kusa* grass which in the Markandeya and the Brahmanda Purana has similar associational features. In the Markandeya, Brahmanas are supposed to sit on *Kusa* grass which is also to be used in marriage, sacrifices, *sraddha* ceremonies and for the seats of Mahamunis and wise kings. In the Matsya Purana as well *Kusa* is associated with *havans* and *yajnas*. At the same time, the same plant also has a

malevolent association in the Markandeya Purana where this grass is said to be found near thorns, mountains and stones where Yamaduta takes “*dushta vyaktis.*”

**Conclusion**

We can say that there is a very long tradition of classifying plants and trees in India. We can trace rudimentary forms of classification in the Vedas, but a comprehensive classification of plants and trees were done in Puranas which was the main focus of this paper. As the Indians from very beginning started study of plants as they were considered very basis of life, there is no wonder that we still cherish that tradition. A definitive history of the classificatory system relating to plants and trees in the Puranic tradition remains to be written. Meanwhile this study has tried to demonstrate the usefulness of undertaking a total quantitative and qualitative review of the evidence. It is such a review which allows us to understand the

extraordinary richness of the data and the various ways in which flora are classified in the Pauranic sources.

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