

Ethnobotany of *Butea Monosperma* (LAM.) Kuntze. in Jammu and Kashmir, India

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Abstract: *Butea monosperma* (Lam.) Kuntze. also known as *Flame of the Forest* is an important tree which commonly grows in the Jammu region. It thrives well under dry and arid conditions. The tree is put to many uses like medicine, fibre, fuelwood, fodder and other miscellaneous purposes including socio-religious rituals. There is hardly any religious ritual wherein it is not used in one form or another. The use of its flowers to extract an orange dye for colouring the foodstuffs seems to hold a good potential for substituting the synthetic colouring agents. It requires habitat conservation especially in the localities where it grows abundantly.

Keywords: Flame of the Forest, rituals, conservation

1. Introduction

Butea monosperma (Lam.) Kuntze, commonly known as Flame of the Forest belongs to family Papilionaceae. It is locally called *Palha*, *Palas* or *Palash* and is found in the mixed or dry deciduous forests in *Kathua*, *Samba*, *Udhampur*, *Reasi*, *Rajouri* and *Poonch* districts of the state. It is a medium sized tree with crooked bole and large trifoliate leaves. Flowers are large, bright red and borne in terminal or axillary densely fasciated racemes. Pods are oblong and indehiscent 1-seeded. Its leaves and wood has been used in different rituals by *Hindus* since ancient times. The tree is also considered of medicinal importance. It occupies an important place in the socio-religious lives of local inhabitants.

2. Materials & Methods

The field trips were conducted during 2012 to 2016 for gathering ethnobotanical information related to *Butea monosperma* (Lam.) Kuntze. The rural inhabitants of all the districts of its occurrence were interviewed repeatedly and the information was verified by actual observations in the area. The data compiled has been compared with the literature. The photographs of the plant, various ethnobotanical articles and produces were taken for the purpose of identification, verification and record as well.

3. Results

Ethnobotanical Uses:

Leaves

- 1) The leaves are used in death related ritual.
- 2) The leaves are also used in other social rituals like *hawan*, etc.
- 3) Disposable dinning plates and bowls made of the fresh leaves are used in performing religious ceremonies as well as offering feast by the rural folk.
- 4) The leaves along with bamboo are also employed to make umbrella in the monsoon season.
- 5) The green leaves are a good fodder for the cattle.
- 6) Gargles with dilute leaf extract are very effective to give instant relief from sore throat.

Bark

- 1) The paste of stem bark is applied in case of body swellings.
- 2) The powdered bark is used to stupefy fish.
- 3) Fibres obtained from the bark of stem and roots are used for making rough cordages.
- 4) An incision in the root bark gives a clear red gum known as *Butea-gum*. It is considered very useful to treat cracked heels, if applied overnight.

Stem

- 1) The twigs are used as '*samdhein*' to perform religious rituals like marriages etc. along with the twigs of *Mangifera indica* Linn, *Rosa brunonii*, *Calotropis procera* R. Br, *Achyranthus aspera* Linn, *Pyrus pashia* Ham, *Punica granatum* Linn, *Zizyphus mauritiana* Lamk, *Ficus virens* Aiton and *Acacia catechu* Willd.
- 2) The stem sap is applied on goiter of human beings.

Wood

- 1) The wood of *Butea monosperma* is used to make '*jug-purush*' (i.e a wooden log with human face) to perform some religious rituals like tree worship.
- 2) The wood of *Palash* is used to make the wooden platform - '*Bedh*' wherein the sacred ritual of marriage between bride and groom is performed by the chanting of mantras by the two priests.
- 3) A large wooden spoon locally called '*surcha*' which is used to offer *ahuti* in the sacred fire while performing the religious rituals like marriage etc. is made of the wood of *Butea monosperma* and also of *Taxus wallichiana*.
- 4) A wooden stool is made of the wood of *Palash* to give holy bath to the person in performing religious rituals of marriage etc.
- 5) Wooden parrots made of the wood of *Palash* are mounted on the main entrance of the house during and after marriage to indicate the happiness.
- 6) The wood of *Butea monosperma* is used to make charcoal in the dry arid region of Kathua district although it has now been banned for commercial production.
- 7) The wood is also used to make agricultural implements by farmers in the villages.

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- 8) The wood is used as fuel wood and sometimes also for house building in the villages.

Flowers

- 1) The flowers are boiled in water and cooked to obtain an orange dye.
- 2) Powdered flowers of *Butea monosperma* are useful in detoxification. About 1-2 grams of powder is consumed daily with water as a detoxifier agent.
- 3) Fresh flower extract is useful in spermatorrhoea. Even the dried powder of flowers can also be used to resolve impotency in the males.
- 4) It is also useful to prevent pus from the urinogenital tract of males.
- 5) A mixture of powdered flowers and candy sugar is recommended with milk or water to cure leucorrhoea or vaginal discharge.
- 6) A soup of the flowers by adding sugar and water twice a day is considered useful to cure burning sensation in urination and to dissolve kidney stones.

Seeds

- 1) The seeds are useful against intestinal worms especially in children.
- 2) The seeds also find application in urinal complaints.
- 3) The seeds if pounded with lemon juice act as a powerful rubefacient and have been successfully used as a cure for a form of herpes called dhobi's itch.

4. Discussion

All parts of *Butea monosperma* (Lam.) Kuntze are employed for various purposes by the people and especially the rural folk in the region. It is one of the multipurpose trees of the state. The tree occupies a central place especially in the lives of *Hindus* of Jammu region where it is used for the fulfillment of social, economical and medicinal requirements. As such it is preferably planted near the habitations where there it is not growing in the vicinity. The flowers are a good source of an orange dye. Its use in colouring the foodstuffs like ice-creams is considered safe over the synthetic colouring agents and thus needs to be promoted. The tree is commonly present in the Jammu region but more commonly seen in the district *Kathua* and *Samba*. It requires habitat conservation at a number of localities especially where it grows in abundance.

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