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Research Article

SOME SOCIO-RELIGIOUS FLORA OF RUPANDEHI DISTRICT, WESTERN NEPAL

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Abstract

The present study was carried out to document the indigenous knowledge of local people regarding the use of plant species on socio-religious activities during the year of 2012-2013. The indigenous knowledge was documented by using semi-structured interview, focus group discussion and informal discussion with the local people, religious persons and aged people. Altogether 32 plant species belonging to 23 family and 30 genera have been documented in Rupandehi district. Among them, 13 species were herbs, 5 species shrubs, 13 species trees and 1 species climber. Use of these plant species in socio-religious activities has helped people to conserve the faith of deities as well as to conserve biodiversity in the area.

Key words: Socio-religious; Rupandehi; Biodiversity; Ritual; Indigenous knowledge.

Introduction

Plants are used in many ways including worshipping gods and goddesses for the protection and betterment of human life. In every human society worship is performed with traditional rituals for well-being. Many tribal communities preserve this tradition through folklore and worship their deities right from the occasion of birth to mourning death. They perform specific worship with pressie offerings. Religious practices or ceremonies are performed on various auspicious occasions to seek blessing of gods. Various plants and their products which are being used by human day to day need to use in Havan (burning of herbal ingredients, Kumar *et al.* 2007) and other religious activities like Katha, Brat, festivals, Pathpuja, Pitrisaradha ceremony. Our ancestors followed old folklores. Survival and sustenance in Rupandehi district depended on vegetation near the place of residence.

Rupandehi district encompasses many plant species which are being used as food, shelter, clothing and medicines by the people of village communities. Besides these, some plants are used by the people in different social and religious customs, are known as *Socio-religious plants* (Ahrwar, 2010). The relationship between man and plant communities is as old as his hunger, and long before science was born, our ancestors studied the plants around them to meet their basic requirements, which laid the foundation of civilization (Pandy *et al.*, 2005). Many festivals are associated with the significance of plants in Nepal. According to various legends different plants and their parts (i.e. root, stem, leaves, seeds and fruits) are used in different places for various worships. In this study the description of

socio-religious plants is based on a survey and also discussion with local users (villagers) of Rupandehi district and considered important in the life of a human being.

No many literatures exist in the field of religious flora in Nepal. Religious plants of Nepal have been documented by some workers (Acharya, 2003; Joshi & Majupuria, 2009 etc.). This paper has tried to identify the plants which are being used in socio-religious activities in Rupandehi district.

Material and Method

Rupandehi district is situated in the Terai region of western Nepal. It lies in between 83°12'16" to 83°38'16" E longitude and 27°20'00" to 27°47'25" N latitude. It covers an area of 1360 sq. km. ranging from 100 m. to 1229 m. als. (DDC, 2064). It has tropical and subtropical climate with maximum temperature about 43.7°C during summer (May-June) and about 8.75°C during winter (December- January) and annual rainfall is about 1360 mm. Geographically, it is divided into Chure region (14.5%); Bhabar region (0.6%) and Terai region (84.9%). The famous river and rivulets of this district are Tinau, Rohini, Danav, Ghodaha, Kanchan, Kothi, Danda, Koili etc.

The present study is based on a reconnaissance survey. During the year 2012 and 2013 the different area of Rupandehi district were surveyed and covered extensively to record the major socio-religious role of plants. The information collected on the basis of semi-structured interviews and long discussions with villagers, especially with purohit, religious persons and aged people of Rupandehi district regarding the uses of plants in different

rites and rituals. Most of the plant species were identified in the field. The unidentified plant species were collected for voucher specimen and made herbaria using standard techniques (Lawrance, 1967). They were identified by consulting the available literatures (Hara *et al.* 1978, 1982; Hara and Williams 1979; Stainton 1988; Polunin and Stainton 1984; Press *et al.* 2000) and by comparing with the herbarium specimens of Botany Department in Butwal Multiple Campus, Butwal.

Results and Discussion

Result

A total of 32 socio-religious plant species belonging 30 genera and 23 families from the Rupandehi district has been found. Among them 13 species are trees, 5 spp. shrubs, 13 spp. herbs and 1 spp. climber. These plant species have been described with their scientific name, family, local name and religious uses (Fig 1).

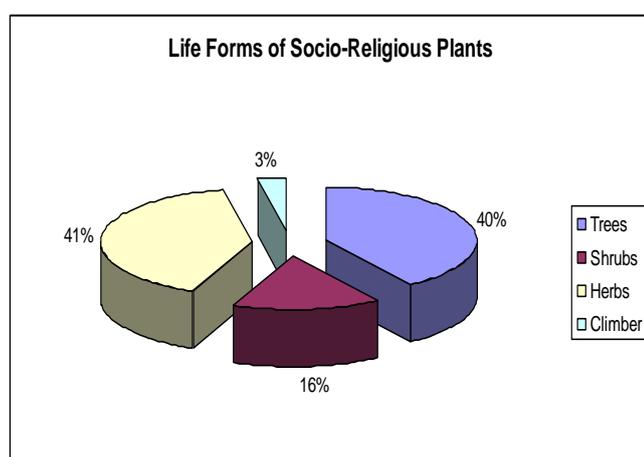


Fig 1: Different life forms of plants percentage used in socio-Religious purpose.

1. *Acacia catechu* (L.F.)

Willd; Leguminosae; Khayar.

Religious Use: Woods are used to make Samida (small piece of firewood) in Havankund (a sacred place). It is worshipped as Lord Agni.

2. *Achyranthes bidentata*

Blume; Amaranthaceae; Datiwan. **Religious Use:** Hindu women use 365 small branches of this plant as tooth brush after 11 times bathing with soil, ashes and sand at the riverside to get relief from the bad effect of menstruation.

3. *Aegle marmelos* L.

Corr.; Rutaceae; Bel. **Religious Use:** Lord Shiva is worshipped with Bel leaves. The three leaflets of this plant are offered for the three eyes of Lord Shiva. In Newar family a daughter is married with a Bel plant before menstruation which is called as 'Belbibaha'. Its leaves are not offered to Lord Surya.

4. *Areca catechu* L.

Palmae, Supari. **Religious Use:** Fruits are offered to Lord Ganesh and are essential for all religious ritual.

5. *Artemisia indica*

Willd; Compositae; Titepati. **Religious Use:** Leaves are offered to gods and goddess in all religious ritual, especially during Pitrisradha.

6. *Brassica campestris* L.

Cruciferae; Tori. **Religious Use:** Seeds are spread around the holy Mandap during the worship of god, goddess and Pitrisradha, which help to prevent the entry of devil in the Mandap. Its oil is used to burn 'Diyo' (a type of oil lamp) during religious ritual.

7. *Butea monosperma* (Lam.)

Kuntze; Leguminosae; Palas. **Religious Use:** Woods are used to make Samida in Havankund.

8. *Calotropis gigantea* (L.)

Dryand; Asclepiadaceae; Aank. **Religious Use:** It is believed that Aank plant is the daughter of god Surya. Thus some men get married with this plant to remove the bad effect of possibility of second marriage.

9. *Cannabis sativa* L.

Cannabaceae; Ganja. **Religious Use:** 'Bhang' is made by drying the young leaves and dried flowering tops of female plants and are offered to Lord Shiva. It is also taken by Sadhu, Saint and other people to please Lord Shiva during Shivaratri.

10. *Cocos nucifera* L.

Palmae; Nariwal. **Religious Use:** Fruits are offered to Lord Ganesh and other god and goddess. The liquid present inside the fruit is used to bath god and goddess.

11. *Curcuma angustifolia* Rox.

Zinziberaceae; Besar. **Religious Use:** The powder obtained from the rhizome of this plant is used during Rakshabandhan, Grahashanti, Navagrahapuja etc.

12. *Cynodon dactylon* (L.) Pers.

Graminae; Dubo. **Religious Use:** It is used to worship the Lord Ganesh but it is not used to worship the goddess. It is also used on the occasion of holy function, festival and marriage.

13. *Datura metel* L.

Solanaceae; Dhaturo. **Religious Use:** Flowers and fruits of this plant are offered to please god Shiva.

14. *Demostachya bipinnata* L.

Stapf; Graminae; Kush. **Religious Use:** The dried leaves are used to make the model of gods. The lower part of it represents the Bramha, middle part the Bishnu and the top part Shiva. It is used in all ritual functions. It is considered to be sin if women break Kush and also it is broken by nails.

15. *Elaeocarpus sphaericus* (Gaertn)

K.Schum. Elaeocarpaceae; Rudraksha. **Religious Use:** Garland is made from fruits of this plant, which is offered to please god Shiva. If someone wears the garland of Rudraksha, he/she will go to the heaven after his/her death.

16. *Euphorbia royleana* Boiss

Euphorbiaceae; Siudi. **Religious Use:** Siudi is planted in the clay pot having soil and kept at the top of new house during Bastupuja. It protects house from lightening and devil.

17. *Ficus benghalensis* L.

Moraceae; Bar. **Religious Use:** The leaf of Bar tree is said to be the resting place for the god Krishna. Leaves are kept in Kalash (vessel with water) during worship of god. The leaves are used in Bratbandh, Chaurasipuja etc. The god Shiva is depicted sitting in silence under the Bar tree with Rishis at his feet.

18. *Ficus benjamina* L.

Moraceae; Swami. **Religious Use:** It is worshipped as God Bishnu. It is necessary for Shanigraha puja.

19. *Ficus religiosa* L.

Moraceae; Pipal. **Religious Use:** It is worshipped as god Bishnu. *Ficus benghalensis* is considered as husband and *Ficus religiosa* as wife. Those people who cultivate & make marriage between them by constructing Chautari (rest place), their progenies spread all over the world like the branches of these plants.

20. *Gossypium arboreum* L.

Malvaceae; Kapas. **Religious Use:** The fibres are used to make Batti (thick thread) which is used to burn Diyo during the worship of god, goddess, and Pitripuja. If someone makes one lakh and 25 thousand Batti and burns them in the name of the god and goddess, his/her progenies and ancestors get rid of sin up to seven generations.

21. *Hordeum vulgare* L.

Graminae; Jou. **Religious Use:** Seeds are used in Havan. It is the most important part of havan samagri.

22. *Juglans regia* L.

Juglandaceae; Okhar. **Religious Use:** Fruits of these plants are used in Tihar festivals. Sisters break fruits at the door and small pieces are thrown in all direction during Bhaitika, which help their brothers to keep away from enemies and devil.

23. *Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn

Nymphaeaceae; Kamal. **Religious Use:** It is believed that god Bishnu is originated from the flower of this plant and worshipped as Bishnu.

24. *Ocimum sanctum* L.

Labiatae; Tulsi. **Religious Use:** Whole plant is considered as the incarnation of god Bishnu. It prevents entry of germs inside the house. If someone drinks the Jal (holy water) of this plant at the time of death, he/she will get relief from sin.

Its leaves are not offered to Lord Ganesh. The presence of Tulsi plant symbolizes the religious bent of Hindu family.

25. *Oryza sativa* L.

Graminae; Dhan. **Religious Use:** Seeds are necessary in Mandap. After the death of human, in 13th day, it is used for Havan.

26. *Piper betle* L.

Piperaceae; Pan. **Religious Use:** Leaves of this plant are offered to god Ganesh. Leaves are also offered to worship other god and goddess.

27. *Santalum album* L.

Santalaceae; Shrikhand. **Religious Use:** It is believed that this plant is originated from god Shiva. Chandan (thick paste) is made by rubbing the hard wood of this plant and applied on the forehead as holy 'Tika' during ritual process. Its wood is used to make 'Suro' (about 1.5 feet long piece of wood having palm-like structure at one end) for havan.

28. *Shorea robusta* Gaertn

Dipterocarpaceae; Sal. **Religious Use:** Leaves are used to prepare 'Tapari'(plate) and 'Duno'(small bowl), which are used in all ritual functions and are regarded as chokho (uncontaminated). Its wood is also used to make 'Suro' (about 1.5 feet long piece of wood having palm-like structure at one end) for havan.

29. *Sesamum orientale* L.

Pedaliaceae; Til. **Religious Use:** It is believed that Til is originated from the perspiration of god Shiva. Seeds are used in Havan. It is also most important part of havan samagri.

30. *Prunus cerasoids* Don.

Rosaceae; Paiyu. **Religious Use:** Branches are used to make sticks and these sticks are used in 'Bratbandha'.

31. *Triticum aestivum* L.

Graminae; Gahu. **Religious Use:** Seeds are used in Grahashanti, especially in Rahu Grahashanti.

32. *Sachharum officinarum* L.

Graminae; Ukhu. **Religious Use:** Erect stems are used to make holy Mandap. It is also used in Shivaratri.

Discussion

The Hindu religion believes that the world is governed by supernatural beings that play various roles of construction (Brahma), continuation (Bishnu), and destruction (Shiva). Many of the major deities have a number of different forms, each requiring ritual worship at different times and in different ways (Deep, 1989).

Though Rupandehi district is rich in floral diversity, only few plant species (32 sp.) are used in socio-religious purposes. Nepal is inhabited by different ethnic groups like Chhetri (16.6%), hill Brahman(12.2%), Magar (7.1%), Tharu (6.6%), Tamang (5.8%) etc. Among them 81.3% are

Hindu, 9% Buddhism, 4.4% Islam, 3.1% Kirat etc (CBS, 2011). All these people, especially Hindu people, use the whole plant or different parts of plant like fruits, seeds, branches, flowers, leaves etc to worship god and goddess in various religious rituals. People take some plant species as the incarnation of deity and worship them due to their valuable usefulness for humankind. There is no religious ritual which does not require plants and their products (Acharya, 2003). Some plants like *Ficus religiosa*, *F. benjamina*, *F. benghalensis*, *Ocimum sanctum*, *Nelumbo nucifera* etc are considered as the incarnation of God and thus the whole plants are worshipped. In most of the cases people use different parts of plant in various religious rituals. Similarly most of the plants are common for all God and Goddess and can be offered to worship them but there are also some plants like *Aegle marmelos*, *Ocimum sanctum* and *Cynodon dactylon*, which cannot be offered for some particular God and Goddess. For geographical and historic reasons, certain floras have been associated with particular God and Goddesses (Shridhar, 2012). Tree and herb species are mostly used than other species in socio-religious activities due to their common occurrence and usefulness in the area. On the one hand the use of these plant species in socio-religious ceremonies by people, establishes close relationship with the God and Goddess and on the other hand it helps to conserve these plant species near and around the temple, gumba, mosque, roadside, house, garden etc. It also makes peaceful and pleasant environment in that area. The religious customs protect the part of the forest, where deities resides and worshipped and tend to preserve that area as sacred grove (Adhikary and Adhikary, 2007). The religious activities as well as hypothesis also act as conserving tool for biodiversity. So it is necessary to preserve and conserve, which will play a role in betterment of human beings.

Conclusion

The present study shows that the people of Rupandehi district use different plant species in socio-religious ceremonies like Pathpuja, Pitrisradha, marriage, Bratbandha, Bastupuja, festivals etc to worship god and goddess. They have a good knowledge of using and conserving these plant species in the area. This study will help to conserve the faith of our religious activities, which in turn will help to conserve biodiversity of our useful plants. There is strong need to initiate people's participation, training for promoting the indigenous knowledge and conserve the religious plants through traditional knowledge.

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