

April 2013



The Multifarious Mahua

At dawn's first light, a woman wends her way to the forest. The robin chirps from its perch, cutting short its song to hawk the occasional bee, drunk on the nectar of the first flowers of March. A breeze blows, soft yet heavy, pungent yet intoxicating.

She hurries, the dry leaves crackling under her feet-a reminder of the oppressive heat that will follow. In the distance, she can see the tree, wearing a new coat of crimson, which are its first colours for the year. She's walking towards the Mahua tree (*Madhuca longifolia*)- a deciduous tree with a grey, cracked trunk and rounded canopy. The thick waxy flowers, which usually hang from the branches, would've bloomed the previous night before falling to the ground.

The flowers will keep coming till the leaves turn green. A crash sounds from above. She looks up and heaves a sigh of relief-it is only some mischievous langur. Not the mahua-loving sloth bear or the chital, who compete for her prized flowers that lie in a shroud of cream beneath the tree. She will be joined by her children, and they will spend the next ten days collecting mahua flowers.



Mahua Blossoms

Here's how this scene would have played out to anyone who has passed through Central and Southern India at the onset of summer: A strange smell, sweet yet fermented hits the city-bred nostril. A flicker of recognition and someone shouts, "Mahua!" This 'discovery' is followed by the cursory jokes and proclamations about the potency of its liquor. Statements like "worsen man-animal conflict" "deplete forest resources" may be bandied about lending an air of belligerence to the conversation. The conversation will typically end with angry proclamations about

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destruction of forests et al. And all will be forgotten.

Meanwhile, she picks up each flower, careful not to damage it. Her children will join her and they will collect their bounty till the sun is overhead. This will continue for at least three weeks, until the Mahua exhausts its bounty. They will then dry it on flat ground. While some portion will be kept aside to be fermented to liquor, which plays a prominent, almost exalted role, in their customs and traditions. The importance of Mahua to the tribal tradition is exemplified in the Baiga legend where the principal creator, Bhagwan ordains for Mahua liquor to be fetched *before* the creation of the world. Whether it was to rejoice at new beginnings or mourn the inevitability of an end, spur the completion of a task or act as an accompaniment to idleness, this strong country liquor was and still is a spirit for all occasions. To the Gonds, the liquor was imperative to mind, body and spirit- a supply of Mahua was buried with the dead, which was brought about by various ceremonies. They believe it is potent enough to change the form of the creature that drinks it!

Other uses of Mahua

However, ensuring that its partakers stay in high spirits is not the sole function of this tree. A corpse was anointed with Mahua oil to prevent rebirth. Sticks of Mahua are placed on the hands of the bride and groom during the Buhiyas' weddings. While some of these uses were expressions of faith, others had functional applications. The flowers may be dried and/ground and consumed in ways that are varied- raw, boiled, fried in the form of gruel, sweets, flour or mixed with other foods. The fruit also serves as vegetable. Interestingly, during famines, the flowers and fruits of the Mahua have been the salvation to scores of tribal people during intense famines. The seeds yield viscous yellow oil that is used as fuel (for cooking and lighting lamps), as vegetable fat and also forms an important ingredient in the process of saponification. Both the flowers and the oil are believed to possess curative and therapeutic properties. The oil is ingested to cure piles, haemorrhoids, constipation and also used in skin care. A tonic made from the flowers is used as a coolant. The sap exuded by the flowers and stems is used to treat rheumatism. The flowers are known to cure leprosy, eczema, coughs and biliousness and heart trouble. The fruit is used to cure blood diseases. Bark used for leprosy and to cure wounds. Tussar silk is spun when the moth *Antheracea parhia* feeds on the leaves of Mahua.

Economic considerations of collection and trade in Mahua

All across India, nearly 75% of tribal households are engaged in Mahua collection. In fact, studies show that Mahua is one of the top five minor forest produces in the country. But for the tribals, who cannot grow crops, it is important both practically and culturally. In spite of this, they are unable to reap the full benefits of selling. The collectors get too little – Rs. 1000-1500 per season. One of the main problems facing Mahua collectors is the problem of distress selling. They collect 12-15 kgs of flowers (per family) during summer but lack the means to store such large quantities. While the heat will spoil them, the flowers are susceptible to mechanical damage and hence, are sold by collectors to middlemen who will in turn continue the chain. Consequently, in the winter months, these flowers are bought back by collectors at a loss. While the government is able to reap great profits from the sale of Mahua and its by-products, the levying of taxes such as Mandi tax, sales tax, inter-state transport tax, tax on the finished products and VAT take away a plum share of the profits from the traders. Moreover, these rates vary among the different states-M.P., Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Odisha, Bihar and Maharashtra, which further complicates the matter. To compound these problems, there is a repeated clamour that argues against the collection of Mahua. Being a potent intoxicant, it is reviled for its role in worsening problems associated with alcoholism in already impoverished tribal belts. Moreover, those who argue against collection especially near protected areas say that man animal conflict is worsened as this puts collectors into contact with wildlife that could've otherwise been avoided. Also, it affects the food supply of the herbivores. The ground beneath

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the trees is usually burnt for collection, which causes forest fires, which burn large tracts of valuable habitat. The frequency, with which these fires are set off, leaves little time for regeneration of the undergrowth, which is detrimental to the health of the forest habitat. That said, the cultural and practical value of Mahua to the tribes of Central India couldn't be overemphasized. In this regard, research is being undertaken on how to make the growth, collection and harvest of Mahua profitable yet sustainable to both, the tribes as well as the forest. For example, a simple mechanism of using nets to collect the produce was found to impact the collection for the better. While fewer flowers were damaged thus leaving quality produce, the entire tree wasn't covered by a net, which left some amount for the herbivores that feed on flowers and fruits. Also, there is a great emphasis on developing other edible products from Mahua such as jams, pickles, jellies, squash. There are also suggestions to develop and Mahua liquor as a delectable local brew, to be sold to outsiders, much like Goa's Fenny.

That said, there may be fears that development of this variety of products may lead to over-harvesting and even exploitation of the Mahua tree outside and especially, within Protected Areas. Therefore, steps will have to be taken to ensure that this collection cannot take place in areas/habitats that are found to be important wildlife habitats. Given the sensitive nature of this topic, it will take a long time for the powers-that-be as well as the beneficiaries of these ideas to come to a consensus and execute it. However, given the multiple uses of this tree and its importance to the ecological and cultural traditions of Central India, it would bode well to seriously consider the ways in which this tree and its produce can be used to for the economical benefit of the people living here without compromising on the quality of the forest. In doing so, we may find that we are not only protecting the economic interests of the tribals, we will also be preserving their cultural integrity which will contribute to the conservation of the forests that we are trying hard to save.

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