Rupa and Manu Play Holi with ‘Tesu ke Phool’

The atmosphere was vibrant with the enthusiasm and gaiety in air. After all, spring was in its full splendour and Rupa and Manu were busy preparing their armoury of colours as only one day was left for their favourite festival ‘Holi’. Manu was already equipped with a sprinkler ‘pichkari’ to throw coloured water on his friends, had enough of water balloons which he had to fill in the night, 10 packets of ‘gulaal’ or the dry colour in all different shades of pink, yellow, green and purple, and his lethal weapon comprising of red, pink and blue water colours with which he had to paint all his friends’ faces. Gosh, he was so excited. And so was Rupa......

The excitement was so palpable that they both could not wait for the next morning to come soon. As soon as his alarm rang at 6.00 AM, Manu ran out from his bed and was ready in his ‘old clothes’ to play Holi. His mother ran after him with his glass of milk which he finished in one gulp and went out to call Rupa. Rupa was waiting for him in her garden with a bucket full of ‘orange red’ colour which she poured on him as soon as Manu entered. “Bura na mano Holi hai (do not feel bad, it is Holi), said Rupa, clapping her hands and gave Manu a big hug. Manu smiled sheepishly and tried putting the dark purple colour which he was hiding, on to Rupa’s face. Seeing that dark colour, Rupa ran. “Oh no, please do not put these fast colours on my face, those are harmful chemicals which will spoil my skin, see I used only natural colour on you, you also should play a safe Holi”, saying this Rupa ran away.

Manu was confused, “what happened to my sporty Rupa, why is she acting in such a sissy way, she was never like this before”. “Hey wait Rupa, you just said you used natural colour on me, how come? From where did you get the natural colour? And why did you not share this with me”, said Manu in a somewhat hurt tone. “I will tell you everything; first promise me that you will not put that synthetic colour on my face” said Rupa, still running away from him. “Oh God, since when did you become so beauty conscious, o.k. anyways, I promise, I will not use any of these colours on you, but you also promise that you will share your colours with me”, said Manu.

Getting the reassurance from Manu, Rupa led him to the backyard where there were several buckets and tubs filled with vibrant colours. Strangely, all of them smelled so good, in fact heavenly! Manu dipped his hand in the bucket containing pink colour. “Can you guess what this colour is made of?” asked Rupa and before he could answer she added, “this is beetroot colour! Manu’s eyes popped out, “what, Holi colour from vegetable, this is amazing”. Then there was a bucket full of yellow colour which had turmeric, black colour bucket had boiled amla fruits, brown colour bucket had tea leaves boiled in katha (Acacia catechu), red coloured water had red hibiscus flowers soaked overnight and green coloured one had ground henna leaves. “Wow, wow, just wow”!!!

Then Rupa showed him the saffron red coloured bucket, one of which she had poured on him earlier. This is “The Flame of the Forest” (Butea monosperma), known as Tesu, Palash or Dhak in vernacular languages, is the source of the wonderful, traditional colour for Holi. The flowers are soaked overnight in water and can also be boiled to obtain fragrant yellowish - orange colored water. The dried flowers can be dried and powdered for an orange powder. Legend says that Lord Krishna used to play Holi with Tesu flowers, and the flowers also have a lot of medicinal properties” said Rupa’s favourite Bantu mama emerging from behind and rubbed the orange red powder on Manu’s face. Of course, he did not mind that at all!!! Later, they went out to play a safe Holi with all the natural colours and learnt some more about their “Tesu ke phool”......

Shikha Hajela

Heritage Amruth | April 2012
Botanical Name: Butea monosperma, Butea frondosa

Family: Fabaceae

VERNACULAR NAME
English: Flame of the forest, Parrot Tree
Sanskrit: Kimsuka, Palasha, Brahmvriksha
Hindi: Dhak, Palasa, Tesu
Bengali: Palash
Malayalam: Brahmvriksham, Palasi
Marathi: Kakracha, Palas, Paras
Tamil: Parasu
Telugu: Moduga

I am a sacred tree, referred to as a treasurer of the Gods, and used in sacrifice related rituals.

The name Butea was given in honour of a patron of botany, John Stuart (1713–92), the Earl of Bute. 'Monosperma' means 'one seeded' and 'frondosa' means 'leafy'. The Sanskrit word 'Kimsuka' means "like a parrot" or "what brightness!" 'Palasha' means both 'leaf' and 'beauty' in Sanskrit. The older name of the tree, Parna, again means leaf.

Mentioned frequently in the Vedas, its trifoliate leaves represent the Hindu Triad, with Brahma on the left, Vishnu in the middle and Shiva on the right. When a boy becomes a Sadhu he is given a Palasha leaf to eat and his staff is made of Palasha wood. The flowers of the Palasha are used to make a bright yellow or deep orange red impermanent dye. Devotees of Shiva and Vishnu paint their foreheads with it. In the Mahabharata, Sage Jamadagni performs a sacrifice to the gods in Palashvana, or the Palasha tree grove, and the ceremony is attended by all the rivers. The tree in full bloom looks like fire on the horizon. In his Ritusamhara, Kalidasa describes the jungles of Dhak trees as resembling a blazing fire, making the earth look like a newly-wed bride with red garments. Poet Amir Khusrau compared the flowers to a lion's blood-stained claws.
WHERE AM I FOUND?

I am native to tropical and sub-tropical parts of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, ranging across India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and western Indonesia. I am capable of growing in black cotton soils, saline, alkaline, swampy badly drained soils and on barren lands except in arid regions.

HOW DO I LOOK LIKE?

I am a medium-sized, deciduous tree with a crooked trunk and branches. My bark is rough and greyish. My branches are velvety and dark olive green in colour. My large trifoliate leaves are stiff, velvety to begin with and leathery later, and a pale bronze green in colour. When my leaves are shed the flowers come out and these transform the appearance of the tree. My flowers grow in groups of three. Each flower is a flame like orange-scarlet. Standing in stiff clusters each blossom is more than two inches long and each of the five petals is soft and covered with fine hair so that it glistens in the sunlight. My petals curve backwards and one of them forms an unusual beak-shaped keel which gives me my name of Parrot Tree or Totaphul. My fruit is a flat, long pod narrowing at the tip. From a pale green it turns yellow-brown and contains only one seed.

WHAT ARE MY USES?

- The most useful product is the red astringent gum from the stems which is used for tanning leather. The Lac insect lives in dyes. The leaves make plates and strangely enough, at one stage, were used as umbrellas! They also make fodder for cattle.
- Farmers burn my branches and mix the ash with cowdung to spread on rice fields as fertilizer.
- The gum from my tree, called kamarkas in Hindi, is used in certain food dishes.
- In poorer regions of many parts, for example in Maharashtra, my leaves are pieced together to make a leaf-plate or ‘katori’ for serving meals.
- My flowers (tesu ke phool) are used to prepare traditional Holi colour.
- I am also used as a pesticide. The mosquitoes are attracted by the smell and colour of my flower. They lay eggs in the liquid within the flower but those eggs will never hatch. The mosquitoes that touch the fluid can never escape from it.
WHAT ARE MY MEDICINAL USES?

- Bark, seeds, flowers and gum are used in Ayurvedic formulations. My flowers (Tusu ke phool) were used in ancient India in beauty care recipes to improve complexion, suppleness of the skin and disorders of female reproductive organs.
- Seeds are applied for the treatment of worm infestations and allergic skin conditions. Clinical studies have proved that my seeds help in roundworm infestations.
- The seeds are ground and mixed with lemon juice and then applied for itchiness in the treatment of eczema and ringworms.
- A hot poultice of the leaves can be applied on boils, pimples, skin ulcers, swellings and bleeding piles. The crushed seeds can be used for killing maggots in wounds and sores.
- Leaves are used in treatment of leucorrhoea and diabetes: one can always make a decoction out of the leaves and drink, and women can put into a douche for treating leucorrhoea.
- Ayurveda recommends the resin/gum for diarrhoea in children and delicate women (in small quantity); in larger quantity the same is good for bleeding piles and bleeding from bladder.
- Ayurveda recommends the fresh seeds given internally for three days; followed by purgation with castor oil, will clear the worms from the stomach and improve digestion.
- Flowers are useful in inducing the menstrual flow, the same applied as a paste in orchitis.
- Flowers' infusion is given internally in cases of burning micturition and renal problems.
- Ayurveda recommends the bark decoction or powdered bark mixed with honey in cough, cold and running nose.
- The ash of tender branches is known medicine for abnormal growths and uterine fibroids.