

***Butea monosperma* (Lamk.) Taub.: A medico-religious tree of Kandi region of Jammu and Kashmir**

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Kandi region of Jammu and Kashmir includes parts of Jammu, Kathua, Udhampur and Rajouri districts. It covers approximately an area of 81, 000 ha and is characterized by submontane tract having slope of about 30° and undulating/rugged topography. *Butea monosperma* (Lamk.) Taub. (vernacular; *Palash*, *Dhak*, Hindi; *Palah*, Dogri), is the keystone species of Kandi region. It is a moderate sized deciduous tree with beautiful flowers.

Each and every part of the tree has its use. As wood *B. monosperma* is used in the construction of the '*suchha*' (holy spoon), with which '*aahuti*' is put into the fire during '*yugna*' and '*puja*' (holy prayer); the '*chowki*' (small stool), on which the person sits and takes part in the '*puja*'; and the '*toran*' (temporary entry or door-frame), which is prepared at the time of marriage. It is also used as the ingredient of '*havana*' during religious rituals right from the time of birth to death.

B. monosperma is considered a sacred tree and is also known as '*sandal of poor*' in this part of the world. *Santalum album* Linn. (sandal) is a valuable tree found indigenously in the Southern India. It is considered to be the purest of all woods and is used in the religious rituals especially during marriage and cremation of the dead body by Hindus. But, due to its slow growing nature, limited niche and high consumption, it has become a very costly commodity.

The wood of *B. monosperma* on the other hand is cheap and also easily available naturally in the forests of the region. In the religious books, the plant is also having the same religious value as that of a sandal.

B. monosperma is used by all the peoples of the Kandi region as a token of purity at the time of cremation of the dead body.

Leaves of *B. monosperma* are used in the preparation of '*pattal*' (plates) considered to be pure and which are used particularly in religious ceremonies. Latex is used to heal the wound or a cut. The juice exuded from the stem region hardens into ruby coloured gum ('*kamarkas*') similar to '*kino*'. The gum is used as a remedy for pain in waist. It is very nutritious and is also used against loose-motions, and healing the wound. Decoction of flowers is used to keep the white-ants away from the fields. The paste prepared from dried flowers is applied on the stomach, which gives relief from stomachache, urine problem and stone. The seeds of *B. monosperma* increase the semen. Root is used to heal the boil or sore in eye. Extract of the root is prepared by the process of distillation and is put in the eye (2 to 3 drops) twice a day.

In the past few years *B. monosperma* has been excessive exploitation, especially in the charcoal industry. This is slowly, but steadily forcing this beautiful tree towards its extinction. *B. monosperma* is ecologically and medico-religiously very important species for the Kandi region of Jammu and Kashmir. Its sustainable use and conservation should be our prime goal. A ban on charcoal industry from April, 2006 in Jammu and Kashmir is one such step towards achieving this objective.

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