

Sacred Plants in India : A Study of Magico-Religious Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract : *Man and plant relationship is a phenomenon, which started with the beginning of human history. Plants provide raw materials for our basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. Gradually they discovered the medicinal values of certain plants. Because of the plants' immense benefits our early ancestors began to worship some plants. Medicinal properties of plants are recorded in ancient texts. A number of rituals are performed in different parts of India which are related to fertility and are symbolic representations of Gods and Goddesses. Besides the use of some plants for the cure of diseases, these are also believed to have the capacity to ward off evil spirits. Worship of plants has taken central place in socio-economic and religious life of the people. Present paper focuses on the magico-religious beliefs and practices associated with some plants in India. Functional aspects of the plant in human society are also discussed.*

Key words: *plants, magic, religion, beliefs, practices, sacred*

Introduction : Man is much dependant on the plant kingdom. Vegetation is largely dependent on soil types and climate. India is a land with diverse climatic zones. Plants vary from one zone to the other. Plants are closely associated with the daily life of people. India has a good number of tribal communities. Since most of them live near or within the forested areas plants have great impact on the tribal communities. In rural areas there are different types of beliefs and practices centering on certain plants. Even in urban areas of the country plant worship is also common. In tribal, rural and urban areas of India use of plants for magical purposes are found.

Worship of plants may be traced back to Indus Valley civilization about c.4500 B.P. Seals were discovered from Mohenjodaro showing worship of pipal tree (Gupta 1960). Pipal leaf motifs are also found on Harappan painted pottery. Evidences for importance of plants are found in different cultural periods in India from protohistoric periods onward.

In Hindu mythology several plants are related to a number of Gods and Goddess. These plants are considered as sacred. Examples may be given as Tulsi (Basil) and Amlaki (Indian gooseberry), related to Lord Vishnu; Bel (wood apple) is associated with lord Siva; and lotus symbolizes Goddess Laxmi. Some flowers also symbolize divine deities. Flowers and leaves of different plants are also offered to the deities. Garlands of flower are also used in ritual and ceremonies, both religious and social. Most of the plants worshipped are known to have medicinal values and considered as sacred. Often there are mythologies and folklores about origin of the plants. Sometimes trees and its parts symbolize the prosperity, well being and fertility. A number of plants are used in religious rituals and social ceremonies. These are known as *pavitra-patra* (sacred leaves). These include mango leaves, pipal leaves, banyan leaves, bel leaves, banana leaves, basil leaves and some others.

A number of studies were carried out about the beliefs and practices in respect to tree worship in India. Crooke (1896) made an elaborate study on religion and popular folklores of Northern India. As a part of study, he mentioned about different types of religious and magical use of different plants and trees. He also critically described some events in relation to such use in the western world. Hopkins (1969) discussed about some divine trees and groves, mentioned in Epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Gupta (1960) studied tree symbol worship and its significance. He highlighted tree and tree cult that are found across cultures and nations. His focus was on beliefs and practices associated with different sacred plants and its utilitarian role in rural and urban life. In the same year, Das (1960) deliberated on the importance of trees in the folklore of Odisha. He discussed about the myths and folktales with focus on *tulsi*, *bel*, *kadamba* and paddy. Upadhaya (1960) studied folklores related with plants of India. Mahapatra (1960) made a detailed study of tree symbol worship in Bengal. His focus was on *pipal*, *neem* and *tulsi* plants.

Randhawa (1964) made a study of cult of trees and tree worship in Buddhist and Hindus Sculpture. Gupta (1971) explained the reasons for the worship of

sacred plants. Gupta (1980) made cross cultural study of sacred plants in India. He discussed tree cults, meaning of the symbols and interrelationship between plant and people. Chandool (1976) discussed the position of Tulsi in Indian Folklore. Warman (1999) wrote a book on Trees of India and its medicinal, commercial, religious and ornamental values.

The focus of the present paper is on four plants, namely, *Tulsi*, *Neem*, *Amlaki* and *Mango*. These plants are chosen because of their wide use in curing of diseases and a number of beliefs and practices associated with them. These are common plants found in different parts of the country and are indigenous. Data is collected from secondary sources like journals, books as well as from web sources. Data also has been collected through telecommunications.

Mango (*Mangifera indica*) : Mango is considered as auspicious and ritually pure in Hinduism as well as in Buddhism. There are different stories related to the mythological origin of mango trees. It is regarded as the daughter of Sun god (Surya). There is a belief that mango was a fruit of Ravana's *Ashokavan*, where Sita Devi was confined. Rama brought the seed of mango fruit when he returned to Ayodhya after defeating Ravana, the demon. From Ayodhya it spread to other parts of India. Another legend says that, it was the tree of Lord Indra's *Nandankanan*, the heavenly garden, and on his wish it was brought down to earth (Gupta 1980).

Various parts of mango tree are used in rituals in almost every parts of India. It is also used in life cycle rituals related to birth, marriage and death. Mostly these are found in rural parts of India. Villagers in India believe that the fresh mango leaves placed near a newborn child brings fortune. A festoon of mango leaves is hung across the doorways of the house where the newborn baby resides. This is also hung at the doorways of the house where the marriage is performed with the hope of birth of a son to the newly married couple. The festoons of mango leaves are hung at the doorways of temples as well as of rooms where any ritual or worship is performed. In tribal marriage, bride and bridegroom have to walk around a mango tree before the marriage ceremony takes place. They also worship mango trees with vermilion before marriage (Gupta 1971).

Mango wood is used in funerals and also in sacrificial fire. Oblation may be offered to the God only in the fire which is made out of mango wood. It is

considered as holy and sacred when mango wood is used as funeral pyre. Among Brahmins at the time of sacred thread ceremony, a seat (*Pirha*) made of mango tree is used to sit upon and also used as slate on which the *Brahmachari* writes the alphabets (Gupta 1960).

In Odisha, Mango tree is also associated with the God who accepts human sacrifice. So it is preferred to commit suicide by hanging from the branches of a Mango tree (Elwin 1954). Gadaba and Khond tribes of Odisha considered the Mango fruit as a symbol of testicles of men because it resembles the scrotum sac of a man. Among the Bondo and Gadaba tribe of Odisha, there is a ritual of stepping over a bark of mango tree after returning from funerals. The branches of Mango trees are considered as antidote to prevent disease from a village.

There is a taboo of eating mango fruit before mango fruit festivals which is observed all over India. Flowers of Mango are offered to the God *Madan* (the God of love) on the second day of Bengali month *Magha* (January-February). It is also offered to the Goddess *Sarasawti* (The Goddess of knowledge) in *Basant Panchami* which is performed during January- February. There is also belief that the person, who waters the mango tree, leads his ancestors to salvation (Gupta 1980).

Mango tree is considered as a transformed form of God *Prajapati Brahma* (God of procreation). Twigs of mango tree are always placed on top of a water filled pitcher (*purna kalasa*). Placing of a full pitcher with mango leave is an essential thing in worship of Gods and Goddesses. Therefore in religious and sacred days Hindus used its twigs as tooth brushes and its leaf as spoons for pouring libation to the ancestors. Mango fruit symbolizes prosperity and wealth. The devotees are offered mango as *Prasad* after worship.

In eastern India, among tribal groups like Kurmi and Munda, there is a practice of marriage with tree before actual marriage takes place. The bridegroom is married to a mango tree. He is tied to the mango tree with a thread and applies vermilion on the tree. The tree is daubed with vermilion (Nair 1960).

There is a belief in Lucknow city, that a mango grove is abode of 'jak' or 'Sakhiya', a kind of spirit. It is considered as corn spirit. The preservation of patches of the jungle is practiced with the motivation to appease the spirit of the place. This type of practice of leaving patches of groves in a cleared land is also common in Scotland as the 'Gaudeman's Croft' (Crooke 1896).

Mango is considered as auspicious tree and assimilated in the beliefs and practices of people both in rural and urban areas. From the above discussion it is clear that parts of mango tree are essential in the rites of passages. It is used in birth ceremony, marriage ceremony as well as death ceremony. Most of the uses are related with human progeny i.e. fertility cult. Besides these a number of magical beliefs and practices are found in tribal as well as rural societies of India.

Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) : Neem is a common tree in rural as well as urban areas of our country. Various types of beliefs and practices in connection with religion, magic as well as for curing of diseases are there centering on the neem tree in different parts of India. It has immense medicinal values. It is also used for cure of ailments like small pox and skin disease because of its antibacterial properties. Neem oil is extracted from the fruit of Neem tree. It has great medicinal value. Neem oil is applied on the head and planter surface of the feet for lowering down the temperature of a patient suffering from fever. Neem flowers also have blood-purifying properties. The soap made from Neem cures skin diseases. The branches of Neem are used for brushing the teeth. Its antibacterial properties help to protect gum from infection.

In Ancient text (Vedas), Neem is called "*Sarva Roga Nivarini*", which means that Neem can cure all diseases and illness. Mythological story tells that the Sun took shelter in the Neem tree to escape from the overwhelming powers of the demons. Planting three or more Neem trees during one's lifetime was considered virtuous and one who does it his soul is supposed to be rested in the heaven after death. In Indian mythology Neem is considered as "*Kalpavriksha*", the wish full filling tree (Patil 2008).

Nimbarak is a sect of Vaishnavas who worship the Sun in a neem tree. Legend says that Bhaskaracharya, the founder of this sect, had invited a 'Bairagi' to dine with him and unfortunately delayed in calling his guest for meal till after sunset. He was distressed to learn that the 'Bairagi' is prohibited from taking food after sunset. Bhaskaracharya pleaded with Sun god and he descended on the neem tree under which the food was consumed. Thereafter the neem tree is regarded as Sun God (Crooke 1896).

In Bengal, the nick name of Chaitnya Mahabrabhu was '*Nemai*'. His mother gave the name because he was born under a Neem tree. This event also implies that the tree was also considered as sacred. Since neem is bitter in taste, it is

believed that it can protect people from evil eye. In Nabadwip, district Nadia, West Bengal, the neem tree under which Sri Chaitnya Mahabrabhu was born is worshipped as holy.

Beliefs and practices associated with neem : There is a belief that The Goddess *Shitala* (Goddess of small pox) and her six sisters resided in Neem trees. When a person suffers from small-pox, neem leaves are used in various ways for curing as well as for prevention of the disease. The patient is fanned with the leafy twigs of neem. As the leaves are seats of the goddess, its leaves are believed to possess a curative value. Neem trees are worshipped from the seventh day of waning moon of the Bengali month *Chaitra* to the same date in the month of *Ashar* (July-August). This time is considered as the epidemic season, when diseases like small and chicken pox, measles and other ailments become endemic. Women take bath, wear new clothes and offer rice, sandal wood, flowers and incense at the bottom of the tree (Crooke 1896).

Neem leaves are hung over the front and back doors of the house of Brahmins in Maharashtra, if there is a pregnant woman in the house. The Doms of Uttar Pradesh believe that The Goddess Kali dwells on this tree. In medieval period neem trees were worshipped as the Goddess Manasa, associated with the snake cult. In South India stone images of snake goddess are placed at the bottom of the trees and worshipped. Women also worship neem trees with offering of flowers, vermillion and other fragrant objects on the days of '*Nav-Ratra*', which is performed in the bright-half of the Bengali month of *Chaitra* (March-April) (Gupta 1960).

In Mumbai, in order to protect the mother and child from an evil spirit, leaves of neem and urine of cow are kept at the entrance of the delivery room. When a child is born in the house of a Govardhan Brahmins in Pune, neem leaves are hung on the front and back doors of the house.

People believe that, a person will never be bitten by a snake if he takes food cooked on fire where neem wood is used as fuel. Neem leaves are also chewed in case of snake bites for repealing of poison. A magical belief in neem leaf as a prevention against snake bite prevailed in rural areas. If the man, bitten by a snake chews neem leaf and finds it as bitter, is considered as freed from poison. There is also a belief that if a branch of neem tree is kept with a person, he will

not be bitten by a snake (Upadhyaya 1960). In Northern Europe, neem is also used for keeping out snakes and harmful worms and insects (Crooke 1896).

Neem leaves are used at the time of death pollution throughout Northern India. It is also used as a mode of driving off the spirit which accompanies people from the cremation ground. Neem leaves are ritually chewed after returning from funeral both in rural and urban areas of the country. In Kutch, particular group of *yogis* (*Kanphatas yogi*) pierce their ears and put neem stick in it (Crooke 1896). Neem leaves are used driving evil spirits out of persons possessed. Magical use of neem leaves is also prevalent in rural India. If a man experiences bitter smell of the smoke of burnt neem leaves, it is believed that he is possessed by a spirit. The smoke of neem wood can also defend against the entry of evil spirit, devil and demon (Upadhyaya 1960).

On the first day of Bengali New Year, Hindus take neem leaves with black pepper and sugar with the belief that they will not suffer from any disease in the year. Tastes of bitter and sweet things are like joy and sorrow in life. In South India, flowers of neem tree are used to make *Ugadi Pachhadi*, a kind of pickle. The ritual of taking neem leaves in the New Years day is considered as paying homage to mother goddess on her birth day. Neem wood is used to make *Patgoswami* during *Charak* festival at the end of the Bengali month *Chaitra* (Gupta 1980).

Banjara people test chastity of their wives with the help of neem. Husbands suspicious of the wife's fidelity throws a branch of neem tree on the ground and the woman have to lift the branch as a test of her chastity (Crooke 1896).

Neem wood and Lord Jagannath, Balaram and Subhadra of Puri, Odhisa :

Lord Jagannth of Puri, Odisha is known as '*Darubrahma*' because the images of Lord Jagannath, Balaram and Subhadra are curved out of neem tree. It is unknown what kind of log came floating across the sea to the shore of Puri, out of which the first image was made. Nabakalebar, that is new image of the Lord, is made out of specially selected neem tree at intervals of eight or twelve or nineteen years in accordance with *Madala Panji*, special almanac of the temple.

The age-old tradition of *Nabakalebar* is based on philosophical concept of 22nd verse of the second chapter of *Shreemad Bhagavat Gita*, a scripture of the Hindus. It says that the immortal soul accepts new material bodies and gives up on the

old one. Literally, *Nabakalebar* means new body. It is a combination of two words “*naba*” meaning “new” and “*kalebar*” meaning “body”. Apart from the philosophical explanation, the deity of Lord Jagannath is made of wood. Wood being perishable needs to be replaced from time to time. Neem is chosen for the image of the Lord because it is resistant to pests, insects, and is strong and durable. Further, the Neem wood is considered as auspicious for worship by all castes higher to lower, which is a primary prerequisite for *Jagannath* as he is God to the entire universe. The elaborate ritual of Nabakalebar is described by Mahapatra (2014), Singh (2015) and Pattanayak (2015). A brief account of the same is given below.

Selection of wood (Daru) : Identification of woods for making the idol is done through a long procedure and elaborate rituals. Neem wood for making each of the idols is identified through separate signs.

The tree for making *Jagannath* idol should have dark coloured bark, four main branches and marked with the signs of *shankha* and *chakra*. There should be an anthill and a snake hole at the bottom of the tree. The tree of God Balabhadra must have seven branches, light brown or white coloured bark and marked with the signs of plough and pestle on it. Neem tree for Subhadra should have five branches, a yellowish bark and marked with lotus sign. Sudarshan is made out of a tree with three branches, reddish bark, and marked with the sign of a *chakra* with a depression in the centre.

The ritual starts at mid-day according to the lunar calendar of *Shukla-Dashami*, tenth day of bright moon, in the Oriya month of *Chaitra* (March to April) with the worship of Lord Jagannath with a garland measuring 12 feet. This garland (*Agyamala*) is regarded as a token of the Lord’s permission. This garland is then given to the person who leads the procession of searching for the ‘*Daru*’ i.e. sacred Neem tree.

Worship of the selected wood (Daru) : After finding the *Neem* tree, the *Daitapati*, priest of lord *Jagannath*, places the *Agyamala* upon the tree. The surrounding area of the tree are then cleansed and sprinkled with perfumed water. A platform is erected at the foot of the tree for the *Vana Joga* ceremony. A temporary hut is built near the tree for the group to live. This is known as *Sabar Palli*.

Felling of trees and transportation : *Yajna* and meditation is carried out for three days. The tree is then touched by the priests of different ranks; first with a golden axe by the *Vidyapati*, then by a silver axe by the *Daitapati* and finally with an iron axe by the *Maharana*. After cutting the tree, it is transported with all its branches intact, to Puri on a newly made four wheeled wooden cart.

Making of idol : The work is executed under strictest confidentiality. The work begins on the auspicious day of *Snan Purnima*. After that, prescribed rituals are performed by 108 Brahmins, three most experienced wood carvers begin to work on the idol of Lord *Jagannath*. Two more groups along with three carvers simultaneously start carving the idols of Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshana.

Establishment of soul in the idol : Once the idols are finished, they are brought to the *Anasarapindi* chamber of the temple after taking three rounds of the temple. Most auspicious ritual of Nabakalebar is known as *Ghata Paribarttana*. This ritual is performed in the dead of the night of *Krishna Chaturdashi*, fourteenth day of dark moon, in the Oriya month of *Ashara* (June-July), by three senior most *Daitapatis*, one each for each of the three deities.

Once the *Ghata Paribarttana* is completed, the old idols are considered dead and are buried, along with the subsidiary deities, beds and chariot into a place within the temple premises, known as *Koili Baikuntha*. This concludes the *Nabakalebar* and the new deities are subsequently celebrated with the *Rath Yatra* (Car festival).

Tulsi (Ocimum sanctum) : Tulsi (*Tulasi* in Sanskrit) is known as sacred basil and is considered as the meeting point of the heaven and earth. In Sanskrit text it was considered as "*Tulasi-tulana-ataeva tulasi*", i.e. nothing is equal to the virtues of Tulsi (Dubois 1906). Tulsi is held sacred as it is considered as the symbol of Lord *Vishnu* (The god of preserver). It is also known as '*Haripriya*', dear to Lord *Vishnu*. Hindus, particularly the Vaishnavas and pious women worship it daily. Water is offered to the plant and a lamp is placed near it in every evening. Wealth and happiness prevails in the family. The plucking of leaves is prohibited on Tuesday and Sunday as well as on some special days like *Ekadashi* (the eleventh

day of lunar fortnight), Purnima (the day of full moon) and *Amabasya* (the day of new moon). The *Tulsi* leaves should be gathered carefully so that no branch is broken and Lord *Vishnu* is not hurt. Old leaves fallen from a branch can also be used to worship of Lord *Vishnu*.

Another name of the *Tulsi* is *Vrinda*. In Ancient India, there was a garden of *Tulsi* in Mathura, which was known as Vrindaban. Lord *Vishnu* played in this garden when he was in love with *Vrinda*. Thus place was named as *Vrindaban Bihari*.

There are legends regarding the origin of *Tulsi*. *Tulsi* came out during the churning of ocean of milk for *amrita* (nectar). Another legend says that, *Tulsi* was married to *Jalandhar* who was born from the sweat of the Lord Shiva that fell in the sea. As he was born in the water (*jala*), he got the name of *Jalandhar*. *Tulsi* is also known as *Vrinda*, the wife of *Jalandhar*. When *Jalandhar* became arrogant and started violence on men. People sent a deputation to Lord *Vishnu* to kill him. Then Lord *Vishnu* approached *tulsi* to be unfaithful to her husband, because this was the only way to kill him. After giving the logical explanation, Lord *Vishnu* convinced *tulsi* with the assurance that she would never be a widow and women will worship her. Then *tulsi* committed *Sati*, and from the ash *tulsi* plant arose (Gupta 1960).

According to the tribal myth, when Lord Krishna violated the modesty of *Vrinda*, she cursed him and said that he will have to put leaves of *tulsi* on his head for the wrong he had done. Krishna accepted and granted her desire and *tulsi* is most acceptable offering to him than anything else (Gupta 1971).

According to Hindu belief, the root of the *Tulsi* plant is holiest. Middle part is the abode of all gods and goddess and Vedas stay on the upper part. People gets relief from all sin by looking at *Tulsi* plant and its worship liberates the soul.

Offering of cool and fragrant waters to the plant, covering of the *tulsi* plant during summer with a shed to protect it from heat, and clearing weeds near by cleanses a person of all sins committed. Whoever protects the *tulsi* plant from animals and children shall be protected by lord *Vishnu*. One who waters the *tulsi* with uninterrupted water, during the month of *Vaisakh* (April-May), gets the reward equivalent to horse sacrifice (*Ashvamedha*). One, who sprinkles milk on *tulsi*, becomes fortunate and good luck always stays in his house. One who rubs cow-dung near the roots of *tulsi*, he enjoys the company of Lord *Brahma* (God of

procreation). Anyone who plants *tulsi* with devotion will attain the highest ecstasy on death. Seeing of *tulsi* plant in the morning is same as seeing of Lord Vishnu. Worship of *tulsi* during one's life time ensures strength, glory, wealth and virtuous children. By taking the name, touching and eating of tulsi leaves removes all the sin and pains. One who wears a *Tulasimala* (a garland of *tulsi* beads), no sin can remain in his body. Bathing in water with *tulsi* leaves soaked in it, gets the reward of bathing in the Ganges River. Anything offered to *tulsi* gains the same result as having made an offering to Lord Vishnu. Sacrifices, vows, worship, prayers and good work done near the *tulsi* plant will remain forever even after the death. One who starts journey after looking at *tulsi* with devotion can complete his journey without a misfortune (Gupta 1971).

God Vishnu will punish them who uprooted *tulsi* plant by taking away their luck, offspring and even life. People who urinate or leave excretions on *tulsi* forests, God Vishnu will take away their wealth and life. There is a belief that, at the time of death of Brahmins keeping of *tulsi* plant in front of his head and chanting of '*Tulsi*' and drinking of Ganga water ensures his journey to heaven after death. *Tulsi* prevents entering of evil spirit in homes and also known as '*Bhutagni*' i.e. a killer of demon (*bhut*). According to Gupta (1971), as *tulsi* has a number of medicinal properties it can burn or destroy a number of diseases (*bhuts*). During solar eclipse, tulsi leaves are kept on the cooked foods and waters, so that evil effect of eclipse could not contaminate food and water.

'*Tulsi Vibaha*' is performed in different parts of India on the eleventh day of the bright half of the month of *Kartik* (October-November). On this auspicious day *Tulsi* is married to Vishnu. Among Nairs of Kerala there is a taboo for women for wearing of *tulsi* flowers and leaf. But Nair men would put a twig of the plant on the right ear after his morning bath (Nair 1960).

Amlaki (*Embllica officinalis*) : *Amlaki* (Indian Gooseberry) is known by different names like, *Dhatri*, *Dhatrika*, *Amalak*, *Amlaki* and *Amla*. The tree is considered as sacred as it is associated with lord Shiva, Vishnu, and Goddess Laxmi and Parvati. According to the legend, both the Goddess Laxmi and Parvati went to Prabhas, a sacred place near Gujrat. Goddess Laxmi wished to worship Lord Vishnu and Goddess Parvati wished to worship the God Shiva with some new offerings. *Amlaki* was created from the tears of these two Goddesses.

Amlaki tree is planted on the south side of a temple or home as it is considered as sacred. Tribal people of India believe that it has some magical properties.

Amlaki is considered as one of the most sacred trees in Gujarat. Ninth day of the month of *Kartik* (November-December) is known as *Akshaya navami* and women worship the tree with offerings of fruits, flowers, sandal wood paste and vermillion. It is performed with the help of Brahmins who are fed under the tree. Women worship *Amlaki* tree for a boy child. They tie strings (*mauli*) round the trunk of the tree and walk seven times round the tree.

Amla tree is also worshipped on the festival of *Shivaratri* in the month of February. Red and Yellow thread is wrapped around the tree; prayer, flowers, fruits and incense are offered to it. They pray for fertility of women, animals and crops. Finally they bow to the tree (Crooke 1896).

Conclusion

From the study of the four types of trees certain conclusions are drawn. These are as follows:

- All these trees are held divine. A number of myths and legends are associated with the origin of these plants.
- All the plants have medicinal properties and their use for curing of illness was recorded in ancient texts.
- Different parts of the trees are used in rituals as well as social ceremonies because of sacred value.
- The plants are related to fertility and progeny.
- The trees are related with some magical beliefs and practices for warding off evil spirits.
- In most of the cases there are prohibitions and taboos regarding touching, breaking and cutting of the plants discussed.

All the plants discussed have immense importance in the life ways of human beings. The plants have economic, social and medicinal values. To protect these helpful trees and plants, a number of myths and legends are associated with

them regarding their divine origin. It might have come up for the protection of the plants. The beliefs and practices related with these plants are helpful for survival of these species vice versa the survival of human kind also. Further study may lead to methods of better conservation of our ecological heritage for posterity.

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