
Representing Rajasthani Culture through Khejri, the Kalpataru of the Desert

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Abstract: Khejri (*Prosopis cineraria*) also known as Shami has been acknowledged as the state tree of Rajasthan because of its unique contribution to the cultural diversity of Rajasthan. The tree is also called 'the Kalpataru of the Desert'. The present research paper tries to assert the various attributes through which the tree has contributed a lot to the cultural diversity of Rajasthan. Khejri plays a significant role in portraying the social, ecological, mythological, economic, historical, and cultural aspects of Rajasthan. The present paper tries to find out the significance of Khejri in Rajasthani culture through various perspectives and also tries to assert the point that we need to protect this unique tree from extinction.

Keywords: Rajasthan, khejri, culture, Sangri, rituals

Plants and trees are considered as a gift of God for human beings. It is impossible to imagine life without plants on this planet. Since ancient times, plants have been connected with the culture and worshiped by humans. In different places in India, people worship different plants according to their culture. The name of Rajasthan brings an image of desert in mind. It is thought that the place is deficient in vegetation but there is one plant present in the area that competes with the other mythological plants like Tulsi, peepal, etc. This plant is Khejri and it is known as 'the Kalpataru of the desert'. Using the word Kalpataru presents a lot about Khejri. The word Kalpataru is used for the plant that fulfills all the wishes and khejri is a plant that fulfills all the wishes of the people residing in desert areas. This wonder tree also known as the 'golden tree of the desert' is an exceptional gift of God for the people of Rajasthan. Khejri plays a significant role in portraying the social, ecological, mythological, economic, historical, and cultural aspects of Rajasthan. Because of its exceptional qualities, khejri was declared as the state tree of Rajasthan in 1982.

Khejri is known by various names in different languages of the various parts of the country such as khejri, Jant, Janti, Sangri in Rajasthan, Chhonkara in Western Uttar Pradesh, Jand in Punjabi, Kandi in Sindh, Banni in Kannada, Vaani in Tamil, Sami or Shami in Sanskrit, Sumri in Gujarati and in the Arabic language it is called Ghaf.

The tree plays an important role in preserving the ecosystem of desert areas as it can withstand the hottest winds, and driest season and stay alive where other plants cannot survive. The root system of Khejri is well-developed and the crown of the tree is dense, spherical, and shady. It is known as the king of the desert. From root to pods, every part of the tree is excessively useful. This tree is considered the lifeline of desert dwellers. The leaves are used as fodder for cattle and also to make excellent compost. Its pods locally known as 'Sangri' are considered as the dry fruit of Rajasthan or Marwadi Meva. Sangri is one of the main ingredients of the famous Rajasthani dish, Panchkuta. During the famine of Rajputana, in 1869 bark of Khejri was used as flour. The farmers feel lucky to have the khejri tree in the field because its root enriches the soil, helping increase crop yield. The tree can survive in cold as well as severe hot climate conditions ranging from 5°C to 47°C. Ayurveda, an integral part of our culture, has also acknowledged the medicinal properties of khejri. The bark of khejri is used for treating many skin diseases. This tree's flowers and sugar are given to a pregnant lady.

The khejri is considered as sacred as 'Tulsi' because of its religious significance. Ancient India's sacred scriptures such as Vedas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata are replete with reference to the tree. In Vedic times khejri wood was used to kindle the sacred fire of yajna. It is said that Kalidas did his Tapasya under the Khejri tree and was finally blessed with knowledge. The various mythological tales about khejri have influenced the contemporary culture of Rajasthan. The tree is worshiped on Dussehra or Vijayadashmi that marks the victory of good over evil. In Ramayana, Rama worshiped the Khejri tree before he led his army to kill Ravana. The worship of this tree is referred to as 'sampuja'. In Mahabharata, the Pandavas were exiled in the forest for 12 years. They hid their weapons in a hole in the Khejri tree before they entered the kingdom of Virat to complete their final year of exile, which was an exile in disguise. After completing this final year of exile, they recovered the weapons from the tree and declared their real identities and defeated Kauravas who had attacked King Virat. This day was the day of Vijayadashami. Since then, on Vijayadashami, the Khejri tree and weapons are worshiped and people also exchange Khejri leaves as a symbol of good luck.

Khejri is rightly called the golden tree of the desert because of the economic support it provides to the state. An interesting tale about khejri also asserts this point. According to the tale, Kautsa Rishi was a disciple of Maharshi Vartantu. Vartantu demanded 14 crore golden mudras from Kautsa as Guru Dakshina. Kautsa went to King Raghu and requested for Golden mudras (gold coins). Raghu asked Kuber to help but he refused. King Raghu decided to attack Swarga Loka (heaven). To evade this predicament, King Indra ordered Kuber to give golden coins. At this, Kuber converted all the leaves of the Khejri tree available at that place into gold coins. It is said that it was the day of Vijayadashami when golden coins fell from the khejri. Since then it is worshiped on Vijayadashami or Dussehra. The following mantra is chanted during sampuja:

*Shami shamyante papam shami shatru vinashini
Arjunasya dhanurdhari ramasya priyadarshini
Krishyamanyatraya yathakalam sukham bhaya
Tatra nirvighankatrataav bhav shriram puja*

(Oh khejri, you are capable of removing sins and defeating enemies. You are the bearer of Arjuna's bow and dear to Shri Rama. As Lord Rama worshiped you, I also do. I pray you will remove all the obstacles in my path of victory and make my journey happy.)

Green twigs of Khejri are worshiped in homes on Janmashtami. It is the symbol of lord Krishna in some districts of Rajasthan. In some areas, Rajasthani women perform Asha Chauth Pooja for fulfilment of their wishes. During this Poojan they worship Khejri. The twigs of Khejri are also used during the housewarming ceremony in Rajasthan. It is believed that planting khejri in home is a symbol of good omen and it brings prosperity and positive vibrations in the home.

Khejri keeps an immense importance in performing various rituals in Rajasthani marriage. Khejri leaves and small twigs are kept inside the pot with water and this pious pot is used while performing various social and religious ceremonies in Rajasthan. It is believed to be the symbol of good luck. 'Manda' is a pole made of a khejri tree put on the day of the marriage of a girl. 'Jandi katana' is one of the other important rituals of Rajasthani marriage. According to this ritual, the bridegroom, before setting out for the marriage, cuts with a sword a twig from a khejri tree anywhere in the vicinity. He then makes offerings to Brahmins. This ceremony ensures the success of his marriage. In Rajasthan, the camp of Barat (the marriage party) used to stay under the khejri tree. In Rajasthan, we cannot think of performing any ritual without Khejri. A famous couplet about khejri recited by bridegroom to his mother-in-law:

Aanti tunti khejri, panophulan chhayi

Shabhash mahara sasuji, the latkhan beti jayi

(It means khejri has grown in its irregular shape with the bloom of flowers and leaves. I appreciate

my mother-in-law for giving birth to such a beautiful daughter.)

Sangri is an essential part of the regional cuisine, especially during festivities. It is used in a Rajasthani household on the auspicious occasion of Sheetla Ashtami (about one week after the Holi festival) when no food is cooked in the house. The members of the house eat the food cooked on the previous day. Farmers in Rajasthan offer prayers under khejri before they begin construction of new wells. Land leveller, a tool used by farmers to flatten the soil, is made of khejri wood. In earlier times, farmers used to worship this tool before use in order to get a good harvest.

Mukam is a place in Nokha tehsil of Bikaner district, Rajasthan. This sacred site houses the Mukti Dham temple, that is considered the most important religious place for Bishnoi's. The shrines of Gogaji, Ramdeoiji, Pabuji, Sheetla Mata, and Bhomiyaji (local deities of Rajasthan) are generally beneath khejri. At these shrines, cutting these trees is strictly prohibited, and damaging these sacred trees is considered as anti-religious deed. Khejri is worshiped to offer respect to Gogaji (snake god) and there is a proverb about khejri and Gogaji:

Ganv ganv Goga ann ganv ganv khejri

(It means every village has a shrine of Gogaji under the khejri.)

Rajasthani literature also has various references to khejri. Famous Rajasthani poet Kanhaiya Lal Sethia wrote a poem on khejri entitled 'Khejri, Rut Aayan Pangharsi'.

The historical culture of Rajasthan also presents Khejri as the most important tree of the Desert. The Chipko Movement, which started in April 1973 in a village in Uttarakhand, was inspired by a historical incident related to khejri. Khejarli is a village in Jodhpur district of Rajasthan. The name of the village is derived from Khejri trees that were once abundant in the village. The Bishnoi community of the village considers the Khejri tree as a sacred tree and worships it. In 1730 A.D. three hundred sixty-three (363) Bishnoi's of this village sacrificed their lives while protecting green khejri trees. On 12 September 1730, a royal party led by Giridhar Bhandari, the minister of Maharaja of Mewar, arrived at the village to cut some khejri trees. The trees were to be burnt to produce lime for the construction of a new palace. A local woman Amrita Devi Bishnoi protested and was ready to give her life to save the trees. She and her three daughters Ashu, Rajni and Babu hugged the trunks of khejri trees and were then killed by the Royal party. This incident caused a revolt among the Bishnoi community. For protection of the khejri tree, people began hugging the trees

that were intended to be cut and many were killed. A Bishnoi temple and a cenotaph were erected to commemorate the Bishnoi people, who died away during this revolutionary movement. The movement got its name due to people's action of hugging trees to prevent them from being chopped. 'Chipko' is a Hindi word, which means 'to stick'. Every year 'Khejarli Diwas' has been celebrated on 12 September since 1978. The Amrita Devi Bishnoi Wildlife Protection Award is a national award instituted by the government of India for wildlife conservation.

The khejri tree is appropriately being used as a theme of the stamp released on 5 June 1988, the World Environment Day by the Department of Posts, India.

The Central Arid Zone Research Institute (CAZRI) has done a lot of research about khejri. In 2015 CAZRI released a report that stated that the number of khejri trees is decreasing. According to the report, it is happening because of the high mortality rate due to the decrease in groundwater level, fungal attacks, indiscriminate cutting, etc.

Nowadays, it is not easy to spot tree in cities of Rajasthan due to rapid urbanization. Mere declaring Khejri as the state tree is not sufficient. The government should take strict steps towards the conservation of the tree. The cutting of this tree should be declared as a punishable offense. Proper planning is required to protect this tree from extinction. However, awareness among local people of Rajasthan about protecting the tree is a positive symbol. Khejri trees should be planted more and more so that our future generation can also be benefited by this golden tree of the desert.

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