



Medicinal Plants Used In Various Indian Traditional Customs

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ABSTRACT

Before temples were constructed, trees were open-air shrines sheltering the deity, and many were symbolic of the Gods. Traditionally used plants of India express out the socio-cultural roots of various plants found in the Indian subcontinent, not only telling us their medicinal values but also asserting their ecological importance to our survival. Furthermore, these plants were considered as sacred due to their medicinal, aesthetic and natural qualities. Thus, our ancestors linked various God and Goddess with several plants for their conservation and categorized them as sacred plants. These ancient beliefs reveal that the human relation with plants was also helpful in the conservation of plant species for their valuable qualities. The use of these plants continues in our customs till date but we eventually lost the knowledge of the scientific facts behind them. Present article draws attention on plants both mythologically and botanically and the ancient religious traditions of India to assemble a detailed and account of India's fascinating flora.

Key words: Sacred plants, Tradition, *Ayurveda*, God, India.

INTRODUCTION

Thousands of years ago, India's greatest sages established *Ayurveda*, or knowledge of life, the main goal of which was the alleviation of human suffering. The sages of *Ayurveda* saw all illness and all health as part of an interlocking whole-mind body and spirit that must be treated as one. For medicines and treatments, they looked to the natural world around them, to the plants used by forest tribes since the beginning of history.

In the words of Lord Buddha- the forest is a peculiar organism of unlimited kindness and benevolence that makes no demands for its sustenance and extends generously the products of its life activity. It affords production to all beings, offering shade to the axe man who destroys it. Plants occupy an important place in mythology. Man secured his life from diseases by using various parts of medicinal plants. So, probably this became the basis of conserving plants and might have started worshipping plants. Folklore, culture, food and medicinal practices are deeply linked and influenced by plants¹.

Every nation has its own set of sacred plants. The plant worshipping was quite common in a highly evolved *Harappan* culture, dating the third or fourth millennium B.C. It was also present among the seals of *Mohenjodaro*, one seal depicted a stylised *Peepal* (*Ficus religiosa* L.) tree with two heads of unicorns emerging from its stem². Tree worshipping was also present during the Vedic period.³ India has deeprooted traditional worshipping of plants, which provide base for the grass root conservation practices.⁴ Sacred groves are the tracts of virgin forest that were left untouched by the local inhabitants, harbour rich biodiversity, and are protected by the local people due to their cultural and religious beliefs and taboo that the deities reside in them. They use it in many ways including worshipping gods and goddess for the protection and betterment of human life.⁵

God has bestowed some specific powers to certain plants, which play an important role in prosperous human life. Hindu scriptures tell us that a wide variety of plants like *Ficus religiosa* L., *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss., *Ocimum sanctum* L. etc. have divine qualities, therefore used in number of religious activities, marriages and other ceremonies.⁶

PLANTS WORSHIPPED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE ONGOING RITU

The flowers offered in various months of the year to the various deities are mentioned in *Garuda Purana*, which are mentioned in the table below:

Name of the month	Plants worshipped
<i>Margshirsha</i> (November)	<i>Shiva</i> should be worshipped on this day with offerings of <i>Dhatura</i> (<i>Datura alba</i> Nees.) and <i>Dantadhavana</i> should be done with the twigs of <i>Mallika</i> (<i>Jasminum sambac</i> (L.) Aiton)
<i>Pausha</i> (December)	<i>Yogeshevara</i> is to be worshipped with the twigs of <i>bilva</i> leaves (<i>Aegle marmelos</i> Linn. Corr.) and <i>Kadamba</i> (<i>Anthocephalus cadamba</i> Roxb.), <i>Dantadhavana</i> should be done with the twigs of sandal paste (<i>Santalum album</i> Linn.)
<i>Maagha</i> (January)	God should be worshipped by <i>mauktika mala</i> and <i>Dantadhavana</i> should be done with <i>Plaksha</i> (<i>Ficus lacor</i> Buch Ham.).
<i>Phalguna</i> (February)	God <i>Visvesvara</i> is to be worshipped with <i>Muruvaka</i> flowers (<i>Vedala cadai</i>) and <i>Dantadhavana</i> should be done with <i>Amra</i> (<i>Mangifera indica</i> Linn.).
<i>Chaitra</i> (March)	<i>Karpura</i> (<i>Cinnamomum camphora</i> Nees & Eberm) should be eaten, <i>Dantadhavana</i> should be done with <i>vata</i> (<i>Ficus bengalensis</i> Linn.) and <i>shashkuli</i> should be eaten.
<i>Vaisakh</i> (April)	God <i>Shambhu</i> to be offered flowers of <i>Ashoka</i> (<i>Saraca asoca</i> (Roxb.) DC.) and <i>Dantadhavana</i> should be done with <i>Udumbara</i> (<i>Ficus glomerata</i> Roxb.)
<i>Jaistha</i> (May)	<i>Pradyumna</i> , is to be worshipped with <i>Champak</i> flowers (<i>Michelia champaka</i> Linn.) <i>Bilva</i> twigs (<i>Aegle marmelos</i> Linn. Corr.).
<i>Aashada</i> (June)	Gods are worshipped with flowers of <i>Aparmarga</i> (<i>Achryanthes aspera</i> Linn.) and <i>Dantadhavana</i> should be done with <i>Agaru</i> twigs (<i>Aqualaria agallocha</i> Roxb.)
<i>Shraavana</i> (July)	God <i>Shambhu</i> should be worshipped with <i>Karavira</i> flowers (<i>Nerium indicum</i> Mill.)
<i>Bhadrapada</i> (August)	Gods should be worshipped with <i>Bakula</i> (<i>Mimusops elengi</i> Linn.).
<i>Ashvina</i> (September)	God <i>Suradhiva</i> , lord of celestials is worshipped with flowers of <i>Gandharava</i> (<i>Ricinus communis</i> Linn.) and <i>madanphala</i> (<i>Randia spinosa</i> Pior.).
<i>Kartika</i> (October)	<i>Rudra</i> is worshipped and <i>Dantadhavana</i> is to be done with twigs of <i>Khadira</i> (<i>Acacia catechu</i> Willd.).

PLANTS ASSOCIATED WITH NINE PLANETS

Just as most gods and goddesses in India are associated with some tree, shrub or creeper, similarly all the nine planets which are believed to control the destiny of man are associated with plants. Planet *Ravi* (the Sun) after whom *Ravivara* or Sunday is named is offered the burnt offerings of *Arka* plant (*Calotropis gigantea* (Linn.) R. Burm.). *Butea monosperma* (Lam.) Kuntz. or *Palasa* is sacred to planet *Soma* (the moon) after whom *Somavara* or Monday is named. Planet *Mangla* (Mars) hence *Manglavara* or Tuesday is identified with *Karttikeya* and the plant *Khadira* (*Acacia catechu* Willd.) is sacred to him. Planet *Buddha* (Mercury), hence *Budhavara* or Wednesday has *Aparmarga* (*Achryanthes aspera* Linn.) as its sacred plant. *Aswattha* (*Ficus religiosa* Linn.) is sacred to Planet *Brihaspati* (Jupiter) after whom *Brihaspativara* or Thursday is named. The plant *Urumbasa* (cannot be identified botanically) is sacred to the planet *Sukra* (Venus) and *Sukravara* or Friday is named after him. Saturday or *Shanivara* is named after the Planet *Shani* (Saturn) and the plant sacred to it is *Shami* (*Prosopis cineraria* (Linn.) Druce). *Darbha ghas* (*Imperata cylindrica* (L.) P. Beauv.) is sacred to the Planet *Rahu* and blades of *Kusha ghas* (*Desmostachya bipinnata* Stapf.) to the Planet *Ketu*.

So much importance was given to plants, particularly to trees that a whole ritual was laid for the felling of the trees and for image making for purposes of worship. Not every wood was used for image making, nor could anyone worship an image unless it was sanctioned by the scriptures. For instance, the images for worship by the *Brahmanas* are made from *Deodar* (*Cedrus deodara* (Roxb.) Loud.), *Chandana* (*Santalum album* Linn.), *Shami* (*Prosopis cineraria* Druce.) and *Madhuka* (*Glycyrrhiza glabra* Linn.); for *kshatriyas* images are made out of *Arishtaka* (*Sapindus trifolius* Linn.), *Aswattha* (*Ficus religiosa* Linn.), *Khadira* (*Acacia catechu* Willd.), *Bilva* (*Aegle marmelos* Linn. Corr.); for *Vaishas* from *Putrajivaka* (*Putranjiva roxburghii* Wall.), *Japa* (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis* L.), *Seesham* (*Dalbergia sissoo* Roxb.); for the *Sudras* out of *Tinduka* (*Diospyros embryopteris* Pers.), *Arjuna* (*Terminalia arjuna* Roxb. W & A), *Amra* (*Mangifera indica* Linn.), and *Shaal* (*Shorea robusta* Gaertn.f.).

SACRED PLANTS USED IN DIFFERENT CEREMONIES

Apart from the above associations, a large number of plants are considered auspicious and their various parts like- flowers, leaves, fruits etc. are offered at temples or their wood used for the sacred fire ceremony *Homa*. Below are given the names of a few such plants. The flowers of *Clitoria ternatea* Linn. of Family *Papilionaceae*, called *Aparajita* in Hindi are used in religious ceremonies. Flowers of Gudahal i.e. *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis* L. are the favourite flowers for offering to goddess *Kali*. Incidentally this flower is also a favourite one for incantations in evil designs. The wood of *Arka* (*Calotropis gigantea* (Linn.) R. Burm.) of Family *Asclepiadaceae* is used in *Homa* and its flowers and those of *Dhatura* (*Datura alba* Nees.) of Family *Solanaceae* are offered to lord *Shiva*. The flowers of *Euphorbia neerifolia* Linn.; called *Sehund* or *Snuhi* in Hindi are considered sacred to *Manasa*, the goddess of snakes and are offered at the temple of *Manasaji* by the tribal and hill people where snake worship is prevalent, particularly in Bengal and South India. The leaves of *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss. or Margossa, called neem in Hindi are used in the feast connected with the Lima rites after a death by certain tribes of Orissa. The inflorescence of *Areca catechu* is used in ceremonies on auspicious occasions like marriages in South India and Gujarat. *Kusha ghaas* i.e. (*Desmostachya bipinnata* Stap.f.) of Family *Poaceae* is sacred to the Hindus and is used in religious ceremonies all over India. The odorous roots of *Dolomisea macrocephala* or *Dhup* are used as incense and its flowers offered at shrines and temples. Wood of *Chandana* or Sandalwood i.e. *Santalum album* Linn. of Family *Santalaceae* is extensively used in religious ceremonies. The paste made from the wood has a cooling effect and it is believed to remove sins, miseries and sorrows and to augment riches.

LIST OF SACRED PLANTS AND ASSOCIATED GOD AND GODDESS WHO RESIDE IN THESE PLANTS

Local name	Botanical name	Associated God and Goddess	Medicinal value
<i>Bel</i> <i>Sriphla</i> , <i>Bilva</i>	<i>Aegle marmelos</i> Linn. Corr.	Plant is generally cultivated near to temples and it is sacrilege to cut it down. The tree is sacred to the <i>trimurti</i> (a representative of <i>Shiva</i>) and <i>Parvati</i> (wife of Lord <i>Shiva</i>). The leaves are used in enchantments and twigs are used for sacred fire during the <i>yagyas</i> . Leaves and fruits are used in the worship of Lord <i>Shiva</i> . <i>Bel</i> is described as being so sacred its timber should not be burned as fuel. It is used in <i>shravana</i> month for worshipping Lord <i>shiva</i> .	Fruits fleshy part is dried, powdered and given/used to children as anastigmatic for diarrhoea while Fruits pulp used for stomach ache. Juice is prepared from ripe fruit used as mild laxative. Leaves chewed and swallowed every morning help in healing stomach ulcer and also to reduced sugar of diabetes patient. Unripe fruit of <i>Bilva</i> is <i>vata shamaka</i> ⁷ and <i>shravana</i> month is also <i>prakopa kaala</i> of <i>vata dosha</i> .
<i>Supari</i> , <i>Puga</i> , <i>Phulari</i>	<i>Areca catechu</i> Linn.	The nut is used in many religious ceremonies and offered to Lord <i>Vishnu</i> in <i>Satyanarayan Katha</i> .	Nut powder with charcoal powder (3:1) used as tooth powder. Nut paste is with milk or water given to children for curing anthelmintic.
<i>Neem</i> , <i>Nimba</i>	<i>Azadirachta indica</i> A. Juss	The tree is held sacred by the Hindus and used in many religious ceremonies. It is said that when nectar was being taken to heaven from the world below for the use of Gods, a few drops fell on the <i>neem</i> . Thus on New Year days of <i>Shak Samvat</i> , Hindus eat its leaves in the hopes that they will acquire freedom from disease.	Seeds oil used for manufacturing soap like <i>margosa</i> . <i>Neem</i> oil cake used as repellent for termites. Plant twigs are used to clean the teeth and in toothache. Water boiled along with leaves

		<i>Chaitra Sudi-pratipada</i> is the occasion in the month of <i>chaitra</i> , in which plant is worshipped and tender leaves of the plant are eaten.	used for washing eyes and skin diseases. <i>Chaitra</i> is susceptible to develop <i>rakta pradoshaja vikaras</i> in humans, and <i>neem</i> is best blood purifying herb.
Palash, Kinsuka, Palasa	<i>Butea monosperma</i> (Lam.) Kuntz.	This beautiful tree is sacred to <i>Soma</i> (Moon). The flowers are offered to Gods mentioned in the <i>Vedas</i> that at the time of <i>Samidha</i> , the dry twigs are used in the ceremonies which goes under the name of <i>nava graha</i> (i.e. celebrated to secure the pacification of the nine planets), also on the occasion of <i>Vastu shanti</i> (i.e. entrance into a newly built house). The flowers are used for making a dye used during <i>Holi</i> and <i>Rang panchmi</i> .	The bark and seeds are given for snake bite as antidote. Leaves powder is given with honey to children for curing ring worm.
Safed Aak, Arka	<i>Calotropis procera</i> (Ait) R. Br.	The flowers are used in the worship of <i>Mahadev</i> and <i>Hanumana</i> . The Plant is regarded to be the transformation of <i>Surya</i> (Sun), as mentioned in <i>Skanda Purana</i> . The leaves are as <i>patri</i> in the worship of <i>Ganpati</i> . On every Saturday leaves are made into garland and offered to <i>Maruti</i> (<i>Hanuman</i>). The twigs are used as a substitute for tooth brushes in the <i>Smritisar Granth</i> .	Latex applied on boil and to the wound after scorpion sting for pain relief also. Oil smeared leaves warmed and tied to ripe boil.
Bhang, Vijaya, Jaya	<i>Cannabis sativa</i> Linn.	Plants leaves with milk are used at time of <i>Mahashivratri</i> festival offered for Lord <i>Shiva</i> .	Oil mixed with camphor applied to small boils. Plant with coconut water is taken for a week for curing diarrhoea.
Haldi, Haridra	<i>Curcuma longa</i> Linn.	The rubbing of turmeric is essential part of the Hindu marriage festival as well as some religious ceremonies. The rhizome used in many religious ceremonies of the Hindus. <i>Haldi</i> pastes with water applied before wearing clothes, dyed with it are deemed to be a protection against fever.	Rhizome powder with boiled milk is taken at bed time during cough, cold and also used in healing injuries.
Doob, Durva	<i>Cynodon dactylon</i> Pers.	The plant is sacred for Hindus and niche in the temple of Hindu. Its offers for Lord <i>Ganesh</i> who is said to remove all obstacles in life. Three gods- <i>Brahmas</i> , <i>Vishnu</i> , and <i>Mahesh</i> reside in the three parts of its body- root, plant body and tips of leaves. The plant is worshipped on <i>Durga Ashtami</i> in the month of <i>Bhadrapad Shukla Ashtami</i> .	The whole plant decoction used as Sharbat, it gives cooling effect. Washed leaves paste applied on cuts help in quick healing and its decoction (300 ml) taken orally in empty stomach early in the morning to control blood pressure. Whole plant juice is effective against cobra bite as antidote.
Amla, Amlaki	<i>Embelica officinalis</i> Gaertn	The <i>Amla</i> is worshipped by the women folk on <i>Amla navmi</i> in the month of <i>Kartik Shukla Navmi</i> and also worshipped as <i>Akshay Navmi</i> . <i>Kartik</i> month orders to worship the tree and food should be cooked and eaten under this tree. A <i>Brahmin</i> couple should feed under it whereby all their sins are washed, in <i>Vrat Kaumudi</i> , the <i>Vrat</i> (Fast) and worship of the tree are ordered.	The root bark is astringent and is useful in ulcerative stomatitis and gastric ulcer. The fruits are cooling, laxative, diuretic, carminative, digestive, aphrodisiac, antipyretic ⁸ . <i>Kartika</i> is the <i>pitta prakopaka kaala</i> and <i>Amlaki</i> is best known <i>pitta shamaka</i> herb.
Bar, Vata	<i>Ficus bengalensis</i> Linn.	Hindu mythology says that <i>Brahma</i> was transformed into a <i>Vat</i> tree and it is viewed as the male to the <i>peepal</i> . The dry twigs of	Leaf extract given with milk to both men and women as an aphrodisiac.

		<p>the tree are used as <i>Samidhas</i> for producing sacred fire.</p> <p>The women folk worship this tree on <i>Jeshth Shudh</i> (May to June), to water it, to wind a thread around it to worship it with genda (<i>Tagetes erecta</i> Linn.) flowers and fast on this day known to be the “<i>Vata-savitri vrat</i>.”</p> <p>The British traders who followed King James's ambassador observed that Indian merchants, or <i>bantias</i>, frequently conducted their business under this great tree, considering a contract made in its shade to be binding. Sometimes as many as a thousand <i>bantias</i> collected between the plunging roots of one tree as if it were a stock exchange made of living wood, leading the British to name the tree of the <i>bantias</i> the banyan tree.</p>	<p>Warm paste of the aerial roots together with egg paste is applied in bone fracture and tied with the help of <i>Dendrocalamus strictus</i> for 3 days for the treatment of bone fractions.</p> <p>Latex applied externally accelerated the healing of wounds and open sores, assisted in blood clotting, contained major antiseptic and astringent properties.</p>
<i>Peepal, Ashwatha</i>	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> Linn.	<p>The tree is sacred for Hindus, viewed as the female to the Banyan tree. According to the <i>Valkhilya</i> the marriage of <i>peepal</i> with the <i>Tulsa</i> is ordered. He further says that it is the transformation of the Gods Guru- <i>Ashwatha</i>.</p> <p>The tree is worshipped on every month on which a new moon falls. The <i>Peepal</i> is believed to be inhabited by the sacred triad – <i>Brahma, Vishnu</i> and <i>Mahesh (Shiva)</i> of its wood the spoons are made with which to pour ghee on the sacred fire (Home).</p> <p><i>Peepal</i> under which <i>Goutama Budha</i> attained enlightenment is considered sacred by the Buddhists.</p> <p><i>Ashwatha purnima</i> is celebrated in the month of <i>vaishakha</i> where <i>Ashwatha</i> is worshipped.</p>	<p>Bark paste applied to sores of children (3-4 times a day) to get relief from apathies.</p> <p>Leaf bud is used in curing snake bite.</p> <p>Aqueous extract of bark shows anti-bacterial activity.</p> <p><i>Vaishaka</i> has scorching heat ongoing, and this plant has cooling effect to the nearby environment.</p>
<i>Aam, Amra</i>	<i>Mangifera indica</i> Linn.	<p>Plant is sacred by the Hindus, connected with many mythological legends and folk lore. The tree is said to be a transformation of <i>prajapati</i> (Lord of Creatures).</p> <p>The flowers are used in <i>Shiva</i> worship, on the <i>Shivratri</i> day. The flower is involved in <i>Shakuntalam</i> as one of the five arrows of <i>Kamadeva</i>.</p> <p>The leaves and twigs are employed in adorning <i>mandaps</i> and houses on occasions of various religious ceremonies. The twigs are used as <i>samidhas</i> and offered to sacred fire.</p>	<p>Bark powder (50 mg) with cumin used for preventing conception.</p> <p>Leaf ash with honey used to cures the cough and cold.</p> <p>Unripe fruits boiled, given with rice and curd gives from diarrhoea and dysentery.</p> <p>Person bitten by cobra is laid on leaves, juice of the stem pith given orally and also applied externally as an effective treatment.</p>
<i>Tulsi</i>	<i>Osimum sanctum</i> Linn.	<p>Most sacred plant in the Hindu religion, <i>Brahmins</i> held it sacred to <i>Vishnu</i> found in near every Hindu house and it's said that it protects from misfortunes, sanctifies and guides to heaven all who cultivate it.</p> <p>The mythological story narrates that the plant is a transformed nymph called <i>Tulsi</i> a beloved of <i>Krishna</i> and for this reason near every house it is cultivated, daily watered and worshipped by all members of the family.</p> <p>The leaves make one of the constituents of <i>Charnamrita</i> offered to Lord <i>Vishnu</i>.</p>	<p>Tea with ginger or black pepper and <i>tulsi</i> cures cough and cold.</p> <p>Decoction of <i>Tulsi (Ocimum sanctum)</i>, Black pepper (<i>Piper nigrum</i>), <i>Adarak (Zingiber officinalis)</i> with little salt is good for malaria.</p> <p>Its leaves give relief in stress and cold. It enhances the concentration power of the person and also sharpens the memory. Besides, its leaves are often kept in water for purification.</p>

		Its associated religious festival is “ <i>Tulsi Vivah</i> ” which is the ceremonial marriage of the <i>Tulsi</i> with Lord <i>Vishnu</i> celebrated on the <i>ekadashi</i> of <i>kartika</i> month.	<i>Tulsi</i> plant enriches atmosphere through its divine fragrance and purifies air, so <i>jal arpana</i> is done before sunrise. ⁹ Also the plant possesses maximum of its potency at the time of <i>Tulsi vivah</i> .
<i>Shami</i>	<i>Prosopis cineraria</i> Druce.	<i>Shami</i> tree represents God <i>Shani</i> . It is sacred to Indian culture especially by Hindus who worship it before going on a main journey and on the occasion of <i>Dussehra</i> festival. It is believed that <i>Shami</i> tree worshipping is helpful to check bad impacts of <i>Shani</i> . Religious Hindu women worship the tree regularly.	Its bark has folkloric repute to possess anti-inflammatory, vermifuge and anti-rheumatic properties. It is also used in the treatment of anxiety, asthma, dyspepsia, fever, dysentery, leprosy, piles, wandering of the mind, and tremors. ¹⁰
Coconut, <i>narikel</i>	<i>Cocos nucifera</i> Linn.	The coconut is considered by Indians to be the fruit of aspiration, and a guarantee of auspicious beginnings. A coconut is split at the inauguration of any Indian function, from the launching of a ship to the first take of a movie spectacular, to invite the blessings of the gods.	The true sacredness of the coconut comes from the spectrum of food and medicine it offers for the use of mankind. High in proteins, minerals, and vitamins, and representing an ecosystem complete in itself, the coconut provides milk, water, oil and hard flesh to <i>Ayurveda</i> medicine for a variety of cures, from the treatment of burns and the restoration of hair growth, to the dissolving of kidney stones and treatments for the heart and blood pressure.
<i>kusha</i>	<i>Desmostachya bipinnata</i> Stap. f.	Ring made of this grass is worn in all the auspicious occasions of hindu customs. <i>Sangraha</i> of its root is done in <i>kushotpatni Amavasya</i> .	It is known to increase the concentration (<i>Kushagra budhhi</i>) and promote the intellect. It is antimicrobial and detoxifying herb.

CONCLUSION

Since ancient time plants are associated with human beings. The traditional culture and religion of human beings have deep faith in the nature and its components in every walk of life. Plants provide everything to humans. Indians believe that some plants are represented by gods. The religious customs protect the forests where deities reside which can be preserved as sacred grooves. *Ayurveda* emphasizes the importance of preventive medicine. Its goal is to develop individual's own immune system to such a degree that the body becomes its own best medicine, fighting off infection before disease could take serious hold.

Many medicinal practices were subtly interwoven with the culture, rituals, customs and various ceremonies just in order to make people follow these medicinal practices and remain healthy and take the benefit of the nature as a whole. The religious activities as well as hypothesis act as conserving tool for biodiversity and nature, which will play an important role in betterment of human beings. If man willfully disturbs the balance of living things he will inevitably damage himself. In order to avoid suffering, man must control his own self-destructive instincts. These traditional beliefs support the sustainable utilization of natural resources. Also, the local people possess sound knowledge of traditionally used plants, therefore it is need of the hour to conserve the traditional knowledge and also to pass on this to our present and future generations effectively.

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