

TULSI

Vishnu's Consort on Earth

The aromatic tulsi, which grows in every home, is revered for both its spiritual values and medicinal properties



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The ritualistic veneration of trees and plants has been a common phenomena all over the world, crossing all barriers of time, race, culture and civilisation. In ancient Egypt, the most common sacred tree was the tamarisk, while in Japan, the Shimonishimura, planted by a Buddhist nun nine hundred years ago, was believed to have miraculous properties. It is said that those who ate with chopsticks made from the wood of this tree would never suffer from toothache. Thus while worshipping nature mankind also developed symbolic representations which encompassed art, philosophy and religion.

Dr S Sen, the well known researcher on sacred trees, notes that 'The Africans believe that gods inhabit certain kinds of trees which are never cut with an axe. In Bavaria, there is a tree that brings good luck to newly-married couples, if they go and sit under its branches after midnight'.

Trees and plants were worshipped as a symbol of a god or a spirit who could only be realised through the heart. Thus, in many places it was considered dangerous and inauspicious to fell a sacred tree as the resident tree god or spirit might become angry and revengeful. Thus, in India, since ancient times, trees were first worshipped and then cut down. According to the *Brihatsamahita*, people from the four varnas would first worship a certain tree at night and then invoke the spirit with a special prayer before the wood required to carve a sacred icon was cut. The prayer goes as follows: 'O tree! We are interested in making an image of a deity. I salute you. Please accept my worship offered according to injunctions. May those beings who reside here arrange for their residence elsewhere after accepting the injunctions. Let them forgive me.'

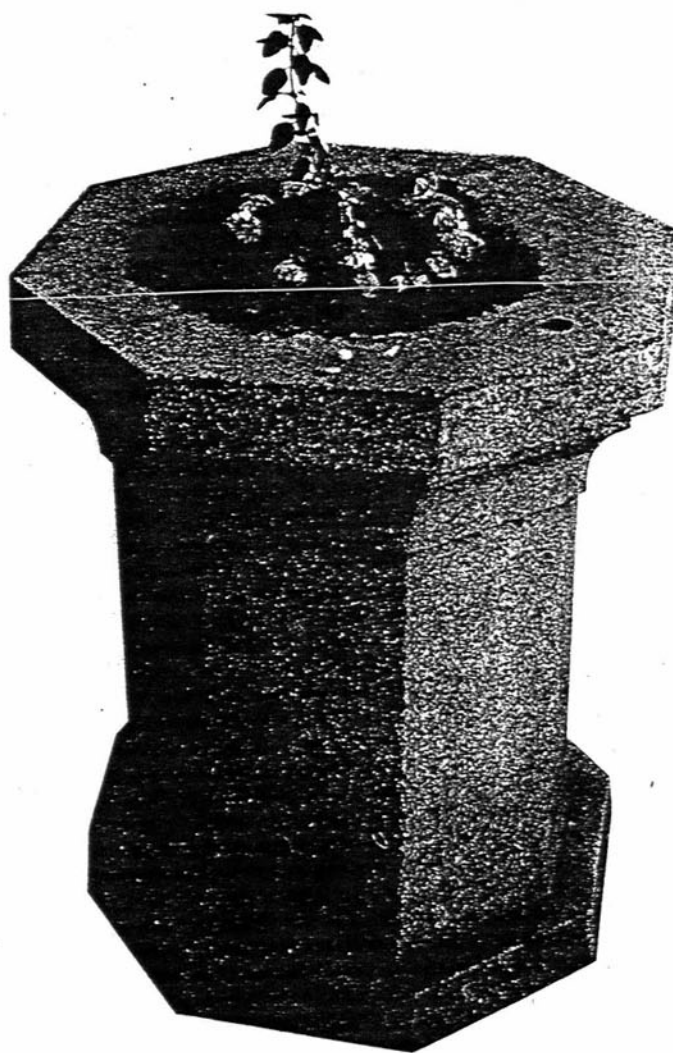
Evidence exists that if a worshipper displeases a tree spirit, calamity will

fall upon him. Similarly, according to the Dictionary of Superstition and Folklore, a terrible storm once lashed the island of Ceylon or Sri Lanka and uprooted the sacred Bo-tree, identified with Lord Krishna. In the *Bhagavata Gita* the Bo-tree is regarded as the abode of the Hindu trinity — Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara. The earliest historical reference to Sri Lanka's Bo-tree is found in Fa-hsien's travelogue. Fa-hsien saw the tree in 414 AD and wrote that the tree was planted as far back as 288 BC by King Devinpattsa. It is widely believed that this tree was a branch of the

Bodhi tree from Bodhgaya under which the Lord Buddha attained nirvana.

Manu, the venerated Hindu lawgiver, estimated that 'all trees and plants are full of consciousness within themselves and are endowed with the feeling of pleasure and pain'. Furthermore, the *Upanishads* declared that 'the God who exists in this universe, in water, in fire also exists in large trees and herbs'.

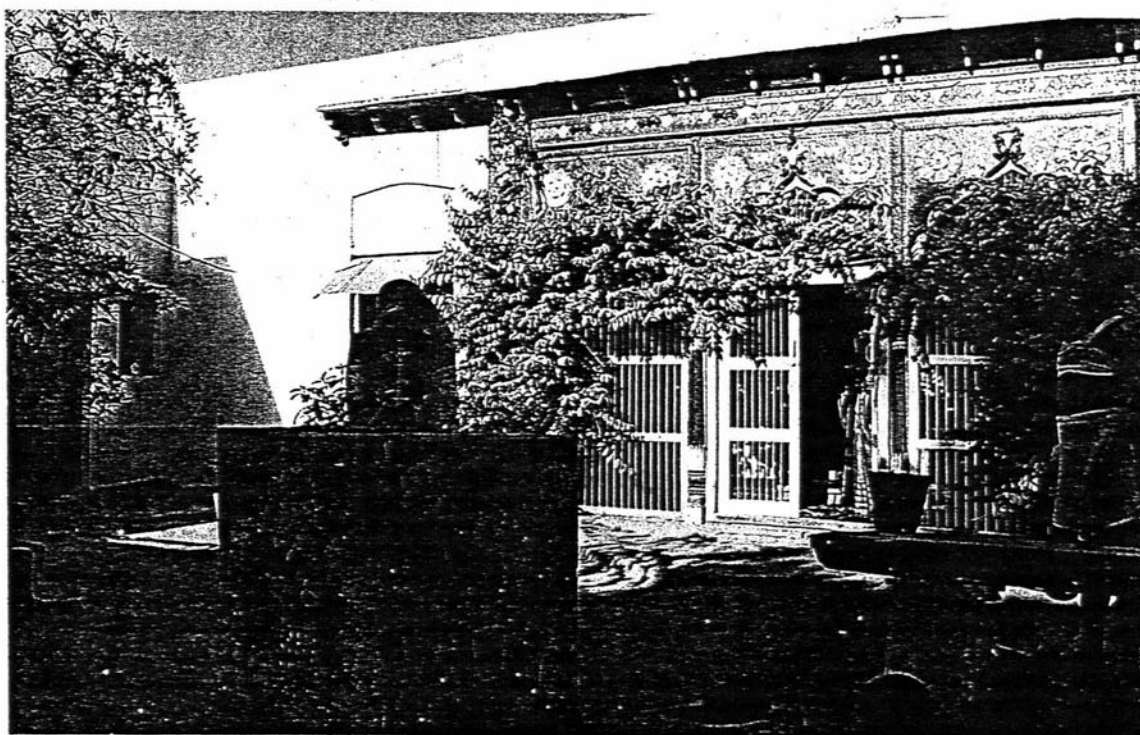
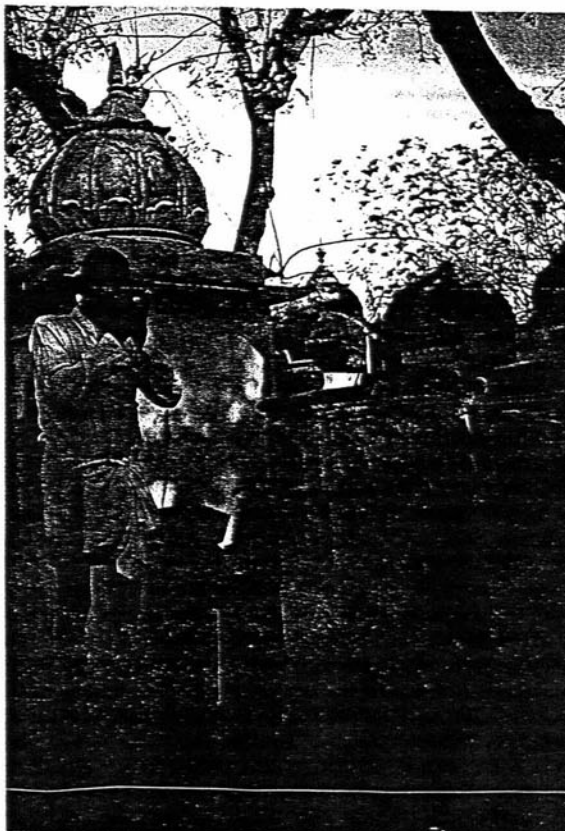
Ocimum basilicum or *Ocimum sanctum*, commonly known as tulsi, grows in the angana or courtyard of



every Hindu home as it is considered one of their holiest and most useful plants. In 1897 JA Dubois wrote that 'Brahmans revere it as the wife of Vishnu and believe that nothing on earth can equal the virtues of the tulsi.' He further quoted *Tulsi-tulana-nasty, ataeva tulsi*.

The tulsi grows everywhere, even in sandy soil and uncultivated regions. There are two types of tulsi plants, the Rama tulsi with light green leaves and the Krishna tulsi with dark green leaves which are necessary for the worship of Vishnu and Narayana.

In his famous book, *The Pattern of Tree Worship and its Significance*, the author Dr Sen, quotes PV Sharma who has traced the origin of the tulsi, and states that there is no mention of tulsi in *Amarkosha*, though the word *surasa* exists. It appears that *surasa* was the prevalent word for tulsi in the ancient period and it was only in the medieval period, probably in the ninth-tenth centuries AD, that the



word tulsī appeared on the scene though it attained prominence only between twelfth and fourteenth centuries AD. Thus it is not improbable that over time, the word *surasa* was philologically converted to tulsī: *surasa*, *surasi*, *sulasi*, *chulasi*, *tulasi*.

Gradually, tulsī also developed symbolic connotations encompassing the names of various gods, goddesses and spirits. Hence, today, we associate tulsī with many names, like Vishnu, Rama, Narayana, Hari, Jagannath, Rai Damodar and Lakshmi.

The origin of the tulsī goes back to the Pauranic age. Vettam Mani wrote in his Pauranic Encyclopaedia that Vishnu had three wives, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Ganga. Saraswati and Lakshmi once had a terrible quarrel and cursed each another. Saraswati's curse transformed Lakshmi into a tulsī plant, forced to live on earth forever. However, Vishnu intervened and said, 'Lakshmi you will live in the world as the holy tulsī and when the curse has been completed you will come back to me. On that day a *gandaki* will start from your body which will be in the shape of the holy tulsī plant. On the bank of that river, I will remain as a stone image (*salagram shila*)'. To commemorate this Pauranic legend on the eleventh day of the month of Kartika (October-November), the tulsī is married to Krishna (*salagram shila*) by all Vaisnavites. The *Tulsī Mahimamṛitya* notes that the tulsī was born on the day of the full moon night, Purnima, in the month of Kartika.

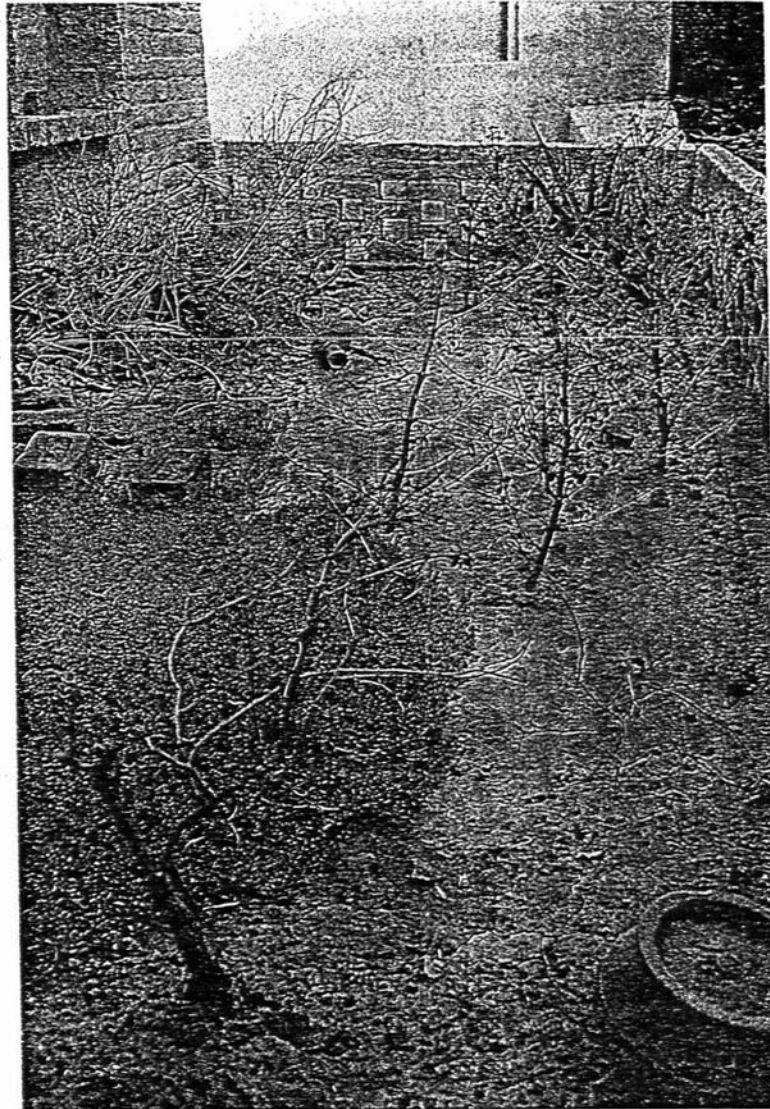
For a Vaisnavite the tulsī is the holiest plant and without its leaves no ceremonial worship of Vishnu is possible. As the destroyer of all the present aeon's evils, it is also considered a sin to break its branches. Thus the tulsī has always been an intrinsic part of Vaisnavism, a fact collaborated by the *Bhakta*

Mala which says: 'They who bear the tulsī round the neck, the rosary of lotus seeds, have the shell and discus impressed upon their upper arms, and the upright streak along the centre of the forehead, they are Vaisnavas, and sanctify the world.'

However, though the tulsī is found in every Hindu home and worshipped throughout India, it is referred to by different names. Known as tulsī in Sanskrit, Bengali, Gujarati and Marathi, it is also called *maiyaṛika* in Sanskrit, *babultulsī* in Bengali and Hindi, *tulasa* in Marathi and

Oriyan, *babri* in Punjabi and *sabza* in Maharashtra. Though it is called *bhutulsī* in Telangana, in other parts of Andhra Pradesh it is referred to as *tirunapatchi*.

Similarly, the worship of the tulsī has varied meanings in different regions. Widows worship the plant to attain salvation, young girls to find good husbands, married couples for the betterment of their children and the old to find a place in heaven. The nineteenth century scholar MM William recorded that, 'in its (tulsī) roots are contained all the places of



pilgrimage; its centre contains all the deities and its upper branches all the Vedas.'

Ritually, since time immemorial, the tulsi has remained an integral part of the Hindu way of life. Puja is offered to the plant everyday, while the prasad of Lord Krishna is its leaf. When a Brahmin is dying a tulsi plant is fetched and placed on a pedestal. After puja has been offered to it, the leaves are placed on the dying man's face, eyes, ears and chest and he is then sprinkled from head to foot with a tulsi twig dipped in

will please the god more than an offering of a thousand cows. Thus whoever offers tulsi leaves at any time is assured of becoming like Vishnu himself, and of enjoying a share in the Lord's happiness.

Brahmins consider it a particularly meritorious act to carefully watch and cultivate the tulsi plant. It is generally grown near the place they perform their ablutions or by their meeting places such as *chuttrams*. The tulsi is usually planted on a little mound of sand, which is called *brindavanam*, or on a square pillar

tulsi plant, as sacred and said that those who smear their bodies with this earth gets the fruits of the best yogi.

The aim and modes of tulsi worship may differ from region to region but the basic aspirations of salvation remain the main objective of *visnustruti*. After their bath the Nairs of Kerala circumambulate the *vrindavana* or *tulsithara* — tulsi planted atop the raised masonry — seven times. Vaisnavites of Uttar Pradesh, according to BL Desai, plant the tulsi on the palm of their hands and with it cover their pilgrimage.

Tulsi worship is not limited to man's spiritual aspirations alone. Hindus firmly believe that the plant possesses many medicinal properties, a view widely acknowledged by the ayurvedic system of medicine.

The leaves have a sweet aromatic scent and act as a cough elixir and cordial; Brahmins always swallow a couple of leaves after their meals to help digestion. The leaf is also considered as a potential preventive medicine and many chew leaves before and after their ablutions in cold water to maintain the stomach's proper temperature and prevent ailments arising from the cold.

Another common practice is to put a few tulsi leaves in cooked food and stored water to prevent germination and pollution. Tulsi leaves also act as an antidote to the ill effects of the solar or lunar eclipses. The plant's curative properties are many, and it is also an antidote to snake-venom. It is acknowledged that tulsi is a great destroyer of mosquitoes and other pests.

Thus, through the ages, the tulsi has spread its aroma across the land to symbolise the socio-religious ethos of the Hindu way of life



water. While this ceremony is being performed his friends and relatives chant... *tulsi, tulsi, tulsi*. The man can then die in peace convinced that he will go to *swarga*. The *Tulsi Mahimamritya* records that if a dying person receives the water of the tulsi plant he goes to Vishnu loka. It is popularly believed that the tulsi wards off the messengers of Yama, the god of death, who will not enter a house containing a sprig of tulsi. When death occurs the funeral pyre should be constructed from tulsi, palasa, and sandalwood.

It is believed that if one waters the tulsi plant regularly one attains salvation. If a branch is offered to Vishnu in the month of Kartika it

four feet in height, hollow at the top, with its four sides facing the four points of the compass.

The *Tulsi Mahimamritya* also states that the *tulsi-sparsha* (a touch of the tulsi) can be compared to bathing, meditation and takes one closer towards salvation. The renowned saint Omkarnath said that if anybody donates a tulsi leaf during the month of Kartika, this *daana* becomes equivalent to *godaana*. Thus, in Vrindavan, all the Krishna temples offer a tulsi leaf as the prasad. Vaisnavites believe that whoever wears a mala made from tulsi seeds will receive the fruits of the *aswamedh yagna*. In one of his discourses, Saint Omkarnath referred to *tulsimritika*, or earth beneath the