

# ON THE ANTIQUITY OF ARECANUT.

*By*

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Arecanut palm is a very popular tree in South India, yielding the much favoured masticatory – arecanut, betelnut or supari. It is one of the most important money crops. It is no exaggeration to say that its price value in the market strongly influences the market fluctuations with reference to other commodities.

In our country, arecanut has been a very important requisite in all ceremonial and religious occasions. It has enjoyed the patronage of the ancient rulers like Shivappa Naik of Keladi and Rajahs of his dynasty who strived hard for the betterment of the crop during their times. Hulibail Basavappa of Ikkeri dynasty was a cultivator by himself. Keladi Basavaraja wrote a book under the title of “Shivatatva Ratnakara” on arecanut. Arecanut gardens were even donated to charitable institutions. A stone inscription of A.D. 1198 referring to the donation of a garden to Navilur Senigeswara temple can be found even now at the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay. (A publication of the Ootacamund Archaeological Institute).

Arecanut has inspired many poets and musicians. There is hardly any “Kavya”

without a reference to arecanut. The life-span of the palm is considered to be the same as that of man and it is associated with the life and culture of our people. It finds a place of honour at all occasions, births, weddings, rejoicings, and deaths. It is an essential item after food and is symbolic of Indian life.

The areca palm belongs to the family palmae of monocotyledons. An unbranched slender stem and a dense crown of green healthy leaves, each leaf composed of many leaflets are most characteristic of this palm. The palm is compared to a green umbrella to which the names Thruna Druma or Tada Vriksha are applied.

“All the palms including arecanut, pandanus, date and coconut are called Thruna-Drumas or Tada-Vrikshas”.

Dhanvanthari Nighantu,  
Poona (1896). Page 328.

“Groups of arecanut palms are presenting a nice appearance. They are full of inflorescences and bunches filled with arecanuts. It appears as if these are green

umbrellas created by Brahma for the bride Bhoodevi or Earth".\*

Sisu Mayana,  
Anjana Charitra,  
B. C. 1300.

In the Vedas, the arecanut palm is described as Devajutha or Kalpa-Vriksha, a creeper like grass which has assumed an upright position after attaining strength and is thus facing the skies.

"I discover a new medicine. It is a creeper representing a stage in between a prostrate and an upright habit. This plant has attained strength.

Oh Plant! With the leaves facing the sky. Will I be able to fix the attention of my husband only on myself with your help."

Rig Veda,  
Mandala 10.

Nachiraja in his commentary of Amara Kosha (Nachirajeeyam), while discussing the synonyms of areca uses the term Brahma Vriksha. Perhaps this may signify the well known Brahma Shrishti or the creations of Brahma. The two things created by Brahma were arecanut and lady both known for beauty and associated with each other.

The annulate nature of the stem with its many internodes has been made use of in calling the plant as Kramukha. The Kannada term Adike or Adake is a true translation of this referring to the gradual attaining of growth of the palm step by step. The term Ghonta is used for areca-

\* The best and heavy bearing trees have been taken for comparison. This description denotes the criterion for the best selected tree.

nut and this is derived from the resemblance of the fruit to a spinning top.

The purgative properties possessed by the kernel are indicative in the name Guwaka whereas the term Udwega indicates the intoxicating and sweating action induced by the consumption of the nut.

"Arecanut is known by the synonyms of Ghonta, Puga, Kramukha, Guwaka, Khapura and Udwega."

Amara Simha,  
Amara Kosha.

The terms 'Thooda' and 'Yoopu' are used to refer to arecanut because the areca stem was used as a 'Yoopu' pillar to which the animal to be sacrificed in the 'Yajna' was tied. Aryans recognized the suitability of the areca stem for the purpose. The term Brahmanya or Brahmadaru refers to the religious importance the areca stem and other parts like its fruit etc. have thus acquired in ceremonies like Yajnas and Yagas.

"Thooda, Yoopu, Kramukha, Brahmanya and Brahmadaru are the synonyms for arecanut."

Amara Kosha,  
Canto II.  
Vana Oushadi Varga,  
Stanza 731.

The fruit is the most important item offered by the Tantrikas in all vaidic ceremonies from the beginning to the end and also while offering Kriya-Dakshina or the honorarium to the purohit or priest at the end of a good Karma. We are familiar with the common saying "I offer you arecanut and nagavalli leaf along with coconut and hiranya (or gold or the amount meant for the priest).

A very close and intensive study makes it clear that the areca palm has a very ancient background both prehistoric and historic as well as religious, social and economical. The term areca denotes aggregation according to Parashara Smrithi.

The most appropriate and accepted Sanskrit synonym for arecanut is 'Puga' which means a society or a Vrinda.

"The term Puga means both an arecanut and a society or guild".

Amara Simha,  
Amara Kosha.

Poet Kalidasa figuratively refers the areca growers as Chakravarthi or Emperors. King Raghu conquered King Maheन्द्रanatha of Kalinga. He again gave him back his land and made him a samanth or subject, after surrendering.

"In the same manner as the emperors conquer smaller kings whom they make their samants or subjects, the areca land lords establish their gardens or samants. The areca palms are given land and every protection. In turn the yield is taken away annually".

Kalidasa,  
Raghu Vamsa,  
Canto IV.  
Stanzas 43-44.

It is interesting to note that areca did not exist beyond Orissa in Kalidasa's time.

Arecanut palm is a social plant. A healthy appearance of a palm becomes manifest only when many individuals are growing in a close association. Its crown, composed of a number of leaves, represents, an aggregation. Similarly the beautiful inflorescences, the number of flowers borne,

bunches and internodes all represent a close aggregation. Thus the term Puga is most aptly used.

"Aggregation of female flowers in an excited condition and clusters of male flowers with collection of pollens were noticed. Also were noticed bunches, full of ripe nuts cool breeze was adding grace to the occasion".

Poet Lakshmisha,  
Jaimi Bharatha.  
Canto - 3,  
Stanza - 27.

Certain guilds or societies existed for every type of transaction much before Panini's time (B. C. 600-800) according to Wilson and Goldstucker. These societies were always referred to as "Guilds" or "Pugas".

"A society or association without a gramani or traditional leader and functioning collectively is Puga. It has red-flag or Lohitha Dhwaaja".

Siddhantha Kaumudi,  
Swarthika Prakarana,  
Ashta Adhyayee -  
Sutra 2066/ (5-3-112).

The exact origin of the palm is a much disputed point. However it is evidently a tropical crop flourishing at and near the equator where it can get the most equable climate, soil, and optimum moisture and temperature conditions. The Dravidians were the pioneers in the use of arecanut. There appears to be a view that the Dravidians were related to the people of Malaya, the archipelago and Australia and that they might have migrated in the prehistoric period to India and other places

If this is true they might have introduced the plant into Southern India.

Wishan Das,  
A help of the study of  
Indian History (1952).  
Dakshina Bharatada,  
Ithihasa - Dr. K. K.  
Pillai (1957).

Vriksha-Ayurveda, the natural precursor of Ayurveda deals with all aspects of the cultivation of crop-plants just like the classification of crop plants, choice of land, seed selection, treatment of seed, sowing and planting, irrigation, manuring and other such seasonal operations very vividly. Testing the seed by putting in water, fumigating, cowdung and urine treatment etc. have been advised for all the seeds in general. Two recommendations which are specially concerned with arecanut are quoted here as follows:

“Jack, Citrus, Date, Mango and Arecanut must be planted where there is plentiful supply of water”.

Vriksha Ayurveda,  
Sloka 41.

“Application of night soil at the base of every arecanut palm during monsoon will enhance the yield, nut weight and set.”

Vriksha Ayurveda,  
Sloka 138.

The following is a general recommendation for the planting of trees in the main field.

“A pit, 48” deep and 48” wide is dug. Sand if any is removed and at the base soft fresh earth is deposited. The base of the

plant to be planted is wetted before planting it in this pit

Twenty cubit (Hastas) spacing between the plants is generally considered to be the best (Uthama). Sixteen cubits (Hastas) is Madhyama or medium and twelve cubits (Hastas) is common and is not advocated.

If the planting is taken up according to these methods the branches and sub-branches of the neighbouring plants do not touch each other and the bearing of the plants will be very good.

Vriksha Ayurveda,  
Slokas 70, 71 and 72.

It appears likely that the masticatory use of the nut might have been first discovered by animals like monkeys, squirrels and rats which usually suck the sweet fluid out of tendernuts as is seen even to-day. The prehistoric man must have then copied this habit. However, there can be no doubt that the practice is a Dravidian habit and in many old works reference has been made only to the chewing of raw arecanuts either tender or ripen by the Dravidians. The commercial importance of arecanut is traceable to the Dravidian Era. In the peninsular India the south is the pioneer grower and producer of arecanut from time immemorial (5000 B. C. atleast).

“Rama while travelling in Pushpak Vimana from Lanka (Ceylon) to Ayodhya points out to Sitha the rich well laid out areca gardens of the West Coast. The trees are in regular rows and full of bunches. He also points out the innumerable empty oyster shells scattered along the sand beds, consequently he points out the arecanut fruits in the meanwhile describing them figuratively as pearls [belonging

to the above shells] which have gone and struck up on the palms."

Kalidasa,  
Raghu Vamsha,  
Canto 13,  
Stanza 17.

We may reasonably think that the habit first introduced into the South was that of eating tendernuts and its preparations. Its cultivation first started in the heavy rainfall regions or 'Malenadu' of the Deccan. The habit of processing tender arecanuts still in vogue in these parts is an evidence of this.

"Aja was also the king of a part of Malayastala or Malenadu".

"In those parts arecanut palms were acting as supports to the betelvines creeping and climbing upon them. The areca palm here is compared to a bride-groom and the betelvine creeper to the bride who depended upon the former. Similarly cardamom bushes were noticed to be leaning upon sandal and other spice trees. Such beauty spots have been described to be best suited for honeymoon for the Royal couple Indumathi and Aja"

Kalidasa,  
Raghu Vamsha,  
Canto 6,  
Stanza 63.

The above is a true description of the picture of malnad parts.

From 'Malenadu' the cultivation seems to have spread westwards towards the sea through forests, where excellent conditions of irrigation i. e. perennial supply of water, soil and temperature conditions prevailed. The commonest saying in South Kanara from Yenekal to Anekal or from the Subramanya hills towards the sea denotes the

spread of the cultivation in this manner. On either side of the hills the cultivators chose suitable sites in the deep fertile valleys mostly towards the north so as to afford a natural shade to the young plantations from the South Western sun. In South Kanara, Havik-Brahmins, Chitpavans, Karhad Brahmins and Gowdas are the pioneer areca cultivators who have mostly migrated from the northern parts of the district.

A common saying among the Havik-Brahmins indicates the importance of arecanut. It can be rendered into English as follows:

"Rain came! Ikkeri harbour is closed. Transportation of arecanut has stopped. There is scarcity for money. The golden nut now floats in rain water goes down and gets sown somewhere".

Ikkeri harbour was the name for Mangalore in the olden days. Arecanuts were not exported in the rainy season resulting in scarcity for money. Nuts were transported to Mangalore only through the connected rivers. Thrift and economy is advised to young people who are asked to collect the fallen nuts from the garden and preserve them carefully since they are worth their weight in gold.

Dravidians developed the eating of tender raw nuts first. Later on, the practice of chewing ripe arecanuts came into being.

"Soldiers of Shri Krishna from Dwarka to India landed in a marshy place where a mixed garden of arecanut and coconut was situated. They wore garlands made of cloves. Drank coconut water and chewed 'Ardhra' or fully ripe and fresh raw arecanuts".

Magha Kavi,  
650 B. C.,  
Sisupala Vadha,  
Canto 3.

From the Dravidians the men in the northern parts of India must have initiated the chewing habit. Further when the problem of storing arecanuts and sending the nuts from one place to the other arose, the method of drying the ripe arecanuts in the sun might have developed. Even now the sun-dried arecanut has a good demand in northern parts of India.

The Indo-Aryans probably copied the chewing habit at this period when arecanut formed a part of beauty and medicinal preparations.

“Let my husband’s mind get attached to me in the most natural way just as a calf runs to its mother and as water flows down a slope.

Oh Arecanut! We two together can conquer the Sapathni (the other wife) and my husband’s mind will get attracted towards me alone”.

Rig Veda,  
Sapathni Badhana.

Aryans sliced the ripe nut and mixed it with four more ingredients. The final mixture was known as Sugandha Panchaka and was recommended against all ailments.

“Sugandha Panchaka contains—Puga (Arecanut), Karpura (Camphor), Kasturi (musk), Lavanga (cloves) and Sumana (nutmeg). This mixture is recommended after food and helps digestion”.

Yogaratakara,  
Nitya Pravruithi Vichara.

The most modern method of chewing the processed nuts with ingredients can be

traced back to ancient times. The oldest process of tasting the sweet fluid contained in the tender arecanut by sucking the fluid, which induced salvation, was termed “Aswadana”. The Dravidians further improved by sweetening it. The next step in development was chewing and eating the kernel or ‘Bhakshana’. Slicing, boiling, colouring etc. were further improvements made in this direction. The modern sweetened betelnut preparations known by the trade names like ‘Ashoka Pak’ are indicative of the Dravidian type of development. The chewing habit must have been one of the many customs which Aryans copied from the Dravidians, in course of time. The Aryan Panchasugandhi has been described in Dhanvanthari Nighantu as follows:

“A mixture of four other ingredients with arecanut is known as Panchasugandhi”.

Dhanvanthari Nighantu,  
Varga - 7,  
Mishrakadi 22.

A little lime was used in the preparation by both Dravidians and Aryans. But the original Aryan preparation lacked in sugar though it came to be used afterwards.

The “Charwana” habit represents the highest degree reached in the process of the evolution of the chewing habit. This habit came only after the introduction of tobacco leaf as one of the ingredients in the Tambula. It is disliked by refined people owing to the spitting involved in the process.

## CHARWANA

### ARYAN WAY

1. Sugandha panchaka
2. Nagavalli (Betel leaf)
3. A dash of lime
4. Other intoxicating substances

### DRAVIDIAN WAY

1. Betelnut Powder
2. Nagavalli (Betel leaf)
3. A dash of lime
4. Tobacco leaf

It is rather interesting to note how "Nagavalli" or betel-leaf came to be associated with the chewing habit. The betel leaf was used as an ornamental plant for decoration usually in neera or toddy shops; later toddy, neera and coconut water were taken in these leaves. Vessels used for preparing the drinks were smeared with lime to prevent fermentation. In those days, it was also a usual practice to chew raw arecanuts after the drink. Thus the three things namely betel-leaf, arecanut and lime must have come closer. The tantrics developed those habit which slowly got infiltrated deeply into the common society as a popular habit.

"Drinking places were decorated near Mahendra Parvatha with Nagavalli leaves. The soldiers of King Raghu drank toddy prepared out of coconut by means of Nagavalli leaves."

Kalidasa,  
Raghu Vamsha,  
Canto 4,  
Stanza 42.

The systematic chewing of arecanut along with betel leaf and lime is known as Thambula-Charwana and is considered to be a good habit according to many medical works. This preparation produces a bright colouration in the mouth and has a pleasant smell and taste and is known to invigorate, the entire nervous system and to afford a new inspiration. It is liked by the Indian women-folk for the colour it imparts to the lips and it is a 'must' in all the religious and social occasions (Ref: Vatsyayan's Kamasutra). An young wife takes pleasure in offering it to her beloved soon after food as also a devotee does to his God.

The use of tobacco leaf along with the "Tambula" is a later introduction and does not permit eating of the preparations. The

preparation is considered to be bad for health. Perhaps the strong influence of the tobacco habit in other forms which threatened the arecanut industry must have been instrumental for the inclusion of tobacco in the chewing.

In addition to the chewing habit the Aryans had also learnt the medicinal properties of the nut and various parts of the plant in detail. The pioneers in this field were Hareetha, Charaka, Susruta, and Dhanvanthari. Astringent, exhilarent aromatic, stimulatory and carminative properties have been attributed to the nut.

"After dinner chewing of pan with certain aromatics and spices is advisable for it has the property of expelling the phlegm which increases after dinner. The pan is astringent, exhilarent, stimulant, carminative aphrodisiac, light and heating. It is a good phlegmagogue, generates semen and blood in the body and loosens wind and fatigue. The various ingredients mixed in certain proportions with the betel leaves are catechu, lime, betelnut, cardmom, cloves, nut-meg and some other spices".

H. H. Bhagavat Simhjee Maharaja of Gondal. A short history of Aryan Medical Science.

Chapt. V.

"Guggulu (Indian Bdellium) and Arecanut bark mixed and prepared in oil will cure 'Vatha Vyadhi' within twenty one days".

Hareetha Samhitha,  
Chap: 21, Stanza: 21.

Students particularly those studying yoga and vedas, virgins, widows and saints are however prohibited from chew-

ing arecanut owing to its Udevega or intoxicating properties.

“Arecanut and *Panicum miliaceum* have the following common properties”.

1. Joints will be loose and expanded.
2. The intelligent aspect of the brain is split.

Sarangadhara Samhitha,  
Khanda I.  
Chapt: IV,  
Stanzas 20-21.

In the modern medicine the nuts, juice and roots are widely used. The medicinal action of the nut is attributed to the several alkaloids present in the kernel.

In addition to the medicinal use the spathe and the leaf-sheath have been famous as media for preservation of foods as can be seen by the following quotation.

“King Rithuparna questions king Nala in the form of Bahuka”.

When vessels made of precious metals like silver and gold are available in my palace why do you prefer to use areca leaf-sheaths and spathes for preserving foods?

Nala answers thus:

“Food acquires pleasant odour from these materials. There is an alround improvement in the taste and quality of food by the further addition of honey and essence contained in the spathe.

Nala Paka Darpana,  
Chapt: V. Page 51,  
Line 45.

We have now seen how the arecanut, which has been a very popular and important requisite in the different stages as well as different walks of human life as well as the culture of our people has a very antique background.

Lastly we end with a quotation from Charaka, who recommends it to all who want to remain handsome and graceful at all times.

“The thamboola should be kept for a long time in the mouth by those who wish to preserve the freshness of cheeks, pleasant odour in the mouth, smoothness and grace of body, power of attracting and overpowering people suddenly, pimples in cheeks, finally peace of mind and body health”.

Charaka Samhitha,  
Canto I.  
Chapter V.  
Stanzas 73, 74, 75, 76, 77.

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