



Coconut – cultural significance

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“Plant coconut trees, they feed you and your children”

The coconut palm is one of nature's wonder. In India, it is appropriately eulogized as 'Kalpavriksha' (a mythological tree supposed to grant all desires – “the tree that provides all the necessities of life”). It is “Pokok seribu guna” (the tree of a thousand uses) to Malay, and “Tree of life” or “Tree of heaven” for a Filipino, “Tree of abundance” or “Three generations tree” to an Indonesian. The very names are reflective of its uses and essentiality in everyday life of people in the tropics. Each and every part of the palm is useful in one way or another and not even an inch of the tree goes waste. The coconut palm is intertwined with life itself, from the food they eat to the beverages they drink and derive almost everything necessary to sustain the life. All the daily needs such as household utensils, baskets, cooking oil, furniture and cosmetics can be made from coconut palm.

Origin and history

The origin of coconut palm is the subject of controversy. Indian mythology credits the creation of palm with its crown of leafy fronds to the sage Vishwamitra, to prop up his friend King Trishanku when the latter was literally thrown out of heaven by Indra for his misdeeds. In Vadakurungaduthurai, Lord Kulavanangeesar is believed to have taken the form of a coconut tree to help quench the thirst of a pregnant woman. In Kerala, Goddess Bhagavati is believed to be the soul of the coconut tree. One of the Goddess's common epithets is Kurumba which means 'tender coconut'. Folktales of all other areas narrate that coconut originated from head of a dead man or from a dead eel. The history of coconuts goes back a long way. It is a journey that began in ancient times. One of the places where the coconut palm was first written about was in



India over 2000 years ago. Early Sanskrit writings from the 4th century BC as well as Tamil literature dating from the 1st to 4th century AD mention this particular palm species. Coconuts were featured throughout the Hindu epic stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The southern coast of India became familiar with coconut long before the country's northern region and later into aryan rituals. The coconut has a prominent role in Indian ritual and mythology (<http://www.hawaii.coconuts.com/coconut-folklore-history/>).

Etymology

The Sanskrit term *narikela* for coconut is believed to be an aboriginal word, derived from two words of South Asian origin, *niyor* for oil and *kolai* for nut (Iyengar, 1913; Achaya, 1998). The Tamil word 'nai' is for a semisolid greasy fat and appears to be derived from words like *ngai* and *niu* used for coconut oil in Polynesia and Nicobar islands (Chattopadhyaya, 1970). The root for names for coconut in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada languages is *ten*. Coconut known as *tengai* (literally honey fruit) in Tamil and as "Nariyal" in Hindi (fruit containing water) from the root word "nari" meaning "water". In Sri Lanka names for coconut are derived from *ten* again directing towards south. Therefore, one has to look for the islands of South Pacific – Malaysia and Polynesia. The local names for coconut in Polynesia, Melanesia (*niu*), the Philippines, and Guam (*niyog*) are derived from the Malay word *nyiu* or *nyior*. This fact is often cited as evidence that the species originated in the Malay-Indonesian region. *Amarkosha* (500–800 AD) records synonyms of coconut and refers as *nariker*, *narikel*, *narikela*, and *langalin*.

Cultural significance

Symbolism

Coconuts have symbolic importance within Hinduism. In Indian culture "Nariyal" or copra is a symbol of good luck and prosperity. All religious functions and rituals start with the offering of coconut since it is regarded

as the symbolic Ganesh, the deity who helps in the successful completion of any work undertaken. Every auspicious work begins with the breaking of coconut and the offering of nariyal is a traditional ritual. For success and prosperity at all occasions, the launch is done with the breaking of a sanctified coconut.

The coconut's rough exterior fibers look like hairs, and its round shape and three eyes resemble a face. For this reason the coconut has been used to represent the three eyes of the Hindu god Shiva. One interpretation is that the three round dots found on the base of coconut represent the Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh), the three main forms of God. Another understanding is that these dots symbolize the belief that, in effect, human beings have three eyes, two physical eyes and a third inner, invisible eye, which can distinguish right from wrong and which acts as a conscience. It is said that coconut can help to fulfill all the desires of the person worshipping it and some consider the three marks on coconut as the marks of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. The coconut can also symbolize a proud heart as it is has a rough exterior but the fruit within is sweet and tender.

Puja

In the Hindu religion, puja involves honoring and connecting with a deity or divine spirit. During puja, Hindus make an offering to the deity and receive a blessing in return. Both the fruit and leaves of a coconut are used during puja. The coconut fruit is used to represent a divine consciousness and is often displayed with its leaves in a pot called a kalasha. A kalasha, also spelled kalash or kalasa is a metal (brass, copper, silver or gold) pot with a large base and small mouth, large enough to hold a coconut. Sometimes "Kalasha" also refers to such a pot filled with water and topped with a coronet of mango leaves and a coconut. This combination is often used in Hindu rites and depicted in Hindu iconography. Sometimes the Kalasha is filled with coins, grain, gems, gold, or a combination of these items instead of water. The coronet of 5, 7, or 11 mango leaves is placed such that the tips of the leaves touch water in the Kalasha. The coconut is sometimes wrapped with a red cloth and red thread; the top of the coconut (called *Shira* – literally "head") is kept uncovered. A sacred thread is tied around the metal pot. The *Shira* is kept facing the sky. The Kalasha is viewed as an auspicious object in Jainism. The Kalasha is used as a ceremonial object as well as a decorative motif in Indian art and architecture. The Kalasha motif was used in decorating bases and capitals of pillars from the 5th century. The Kalasha is believed to contain





amrita, the elixir of life, and thus is viewed as a symbol of abundance, wisdom and immortality. The Kalasha is often seen in Hindu iconography as an attribute, in the hands of Hindu deities like the creator god Brahma, the destroyer god Shiva as a teacher, and the goddess of prosperity Lakshmi. The entire arrangement is called Purna-Kalasha. Purna-Kumbha or Purna-ghata. The Purna-Kalasha is considered a symbol of abundance and "source of life" in the Vedas. Each of these names literally means "full or complete vessel" when the pot is referred to as the Kalasha (to avoid confusion, this article will refer to the pot as Kalasha and the entire arrangement as Purna-Kalasha).

The Purna-Kalasha is believed to be a symbol of auspiciousness embodying either Ganesha, remover of obstacles, or his mother Gauri, the goddess of household bounty or Lakshmi. The Purna-Kalasha is worshipped in all Hindu festivities related to marriage and childbirth, as a mother goddess or Devi. The coconut, a cash crop, represents prosperity and power. The water in the pot represents the life-giving ability of Nature. In this form, the Purna-Kalasha symbolizes the Goddess as the manifestation of mother earth with her water, minerals, and vegetation. This method of Kalash pooja (worship) has come in for Vishnu in household functions to. The Purna-Kalasha is worshipped at Hindu ceremonies like Griha Pravasha (house warming), child naming, havan (fire-sacrifice), Vaastu dosha rectification, and daily worship. A kalash is placed with due rituals on all important occasions. It is placed near the entrance as a sign of welcome. It is also used in a traditional manner while receiving holy personages. Components of the coconut palm are incorporated into a variety of Hindu rituals. Some Indian coastal villages that make a living primarily through the fishing industry present offerings of coconuts to ensure calm, bountiful seas. In the state of Kerala, the largest producer of coconuts in India, coconut flowers are planted in rice bowls and displayed during wedding ceremonies. Hindus break coconuts when blessing a new home or business venture.

Aadi Festival

During Aadi festival, celebrated mid-July to mid-August, Hindus worship the goddess Amman in which coconuts are broken over the heads of the faithful. The ritual is representative of fulfilling a personal commitment or gratitude to the goddess for her blessings.

Coconut Presume to be akin to Human Ego

One of the most common concept associated with coconut is that it represents the ego of a person. This is exactly why a person is made to break a coconut. This ensures that he or she surrenders ego to the deities before they begin the puja or the prayer. Coconut is the only fruit that looks like the head of a human being. The juice inside coconut is considered to be the desire. The traditions say that unless one gets rid of desires and ego one cannot really pray to the deities with devotion.

Selfless bestower

Coconut is considered to be a tree that gives everything. While the leaves are used for thatching and covering enclosures, the kernel is a healthy food. Coconut water is unpolluted water that has excellent rehydrating properties that can be consumed even during serious illness. As a thirst quencher and as a natural antibiotic can be applied on bruises and burns. The kernel can also be used as a fuel. Coconut is a symbol of selfless service to the almighty. Each and every part of coconut is of use to mankind. Nurturing a coconut tree does not require much effort. It can grow all on its own and serve the mankind in many ways.

Conclusion

Coconut is considered as one of the ten most useful trees in the world, and one among the five Devavrikshas (God's trees) known in India, providing food for millions, especially in the tropics. The multiplicity and versatility of uses of coconut tree can be best judged by an Indonesian saying: "There are as many uses for the coconut as there are days in the year." As the coconut tree is named "kalpavriksha" it seems to be like a god given gift in relation to its purity and its primordial uses to the mankind. ■