

# THE FOREST IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE: FESTIVALS AND PLANTS AMONG THE ADIVASI PEOPLE OF BASTAR, INDIA

**Madhu Ramnath**

*Independent Researcher ,Amsterdam (the Netherlands) and Bastar(India).*

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## Contents

1. Introduction
2. Geography and Climate
3. Vegetation
4. Plants and the Adivasi Calendar
5. Work and the Adivasi Year
6. Plants Outside the Festivals
7. Conclusion
  - 7.1 The Perception and Role of Knowledge
  - 7.2 Rights and Restrictions
- Acknowledgements
- Bibliography
- Biographical Sketch

## Summary

This article examines the manner in which festivals are incorporated into the calendar of the *adivasi* (indigenous) people. Taking the instance of Bastar in central India, it is shown how the festivals not only reflect the seasons and the agricultural work to be done but also regulate the *adivasi* use of uncultivated plants. The article shows that each festival of the *adivasi* year pertains to the life cycle of specific wild plants that the people use but do not cultivate. In a broader sense, tradition indicates the ecological characteristics and assures the regeneration of the wild plants in the region.

### 1. Introduction

This paper intends to show how an understanding of the forest is manifested in the tradition of the adivasi people of Bastar, India. The Bastar district is the southern most region of Madhya Pradesh, bounded in the east by Orissa, in the south by Andhra Pradesh and in the west by Maharashtra (Figure 1). The population and culture of this entire region, about 40,000 sq. kms in area, is predominantly an adivasi one; the sustenance of a majority of the people depends on the forest. To elucidate aspects of the

adivasi tradition that deals specifically with plants, the paper will refer to the Durwa people. The Durwa people are culturally and linguistically linked to the more numerous Koitoors of Bastar and inhabit the central, and part of the southern, tract of the district. All adivasi terms in the paper are in the Durwa language.



Figure 1. State of Madhya Pradesh, India, and the detail Bastar District.

Source: Shrivastava and Sahu (1995).

## 2. Geography and Climate

The Bastar region is a plateau that varies in elevation between 284m and 1200m above sea level. The tract falls between the latitudes 18-30°N and 19-20°N and longitudes 81-10°E and 82-15°E. The average annual rainfall (*All figures from the India Meteorological Department, New Delhi.*) in Bastar is 1538.4 mm, of which about 86% occurs during the monsoon months of June to September. In the summer months preceding the monsoon there is rain in the form of thundershowers, usually in the afternoons. The average number of rainy days (with more than 2.5 mm rainfall) in the year are 75, with little variation from year to year. From the central region of the district the rainfall increases

toward the northwest and southeast, and decreases towards the northeast and southwest; the forests are more pronounced in the maximum rainfall zone.

### 3. Vegetation

The forests in the district vary from the moist peninsular sal (*Shorea robusta*) to the tropical dry. Though there is some teak in the southern areas it is sal that dominates on the whole and gives its peculiar character to the forest. The sal tree is both sacred and of daily use to all the adivasi people. Its resin, which is used as incense, is a part of all their religious ceremonies and rituals. The wood is hard and durable and used chiefly in building and the making of agricultural implements. The seeds, which are gathered in summer when the tree is deciduous, are cooked and eaten in times of scarcity. Where the canopy of sal is continuous there is little undergrowth. Such spaces, which are known as 'malangs', draw the adivasi people who come to gather a variety of things; tubers, mushrooms, lianas that yield fiber for rope, twigs and leaves are all found "under one roof".

Where sal does not dominate, as on some hill slopes, the vegetation is varied. Here are found trees of the genus *Terminalia*, *Adina*, *Pterocarpus*, etc, often interspersed with bamboo. In the gullies and along the streams there is an abundance of mango and *Diospyros peregrina*, the fruit of which are relished by monkeys. The thin, drooping clumps of pita bamboo (*Cephalostachyum sp.*) are found along such watercourses (Mani, 1974).

In rocky areas and on dry hill slopes sal is usually absent. Here we find tree species represented by *Sterculia*, *Gardenia*, *Xylia*, *Phoenix*, *Euphorbia*, etc; most of these species have pale barks and are resistant to the heat of summer. A few species of bamboo thrive in these dry conditions.

Despite the fact that a number of plants are found overlapping in different parts of the forest, there are many that are specific, or abundant, in an area. Efficient gathering demands that one is well aware in the floral distribution of the forest.

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### Biographical Sketch

**Madhu Ramnath** is an independent researcher based in Amsterdam and Bastar. He is concerned with understanding adivasi botany and plant tradition, and their relevance to the broader issues of conservation and ecology.