God's Favorite Flower
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INSIGHT

God's Favorite Flower

The world's most beautiful flower is also the most sacred, and it seems there never was a time when Hindus did not adore the lotus

Both in worship and in portrayals of the divine, hindus are infatuated with flowers. The very name of the Hindu worship ritual, puja, can be translated as "flower act." Elaborate and simple garlands, fragrant whole flowers and piles of petals daily rain over Deities in temple, home and village shrines wherever Hindus worship. Though any available flower is auspicious for puja, Gods and Goddesses are said to have specific likes and dislikes of certain species. Of all the myriad buds and blooms, the most revered and esteemed--by God and man--is the magnificent lotus. Our tribute to this blessed blossom is given by Anil K. Goel of the National Botanical Research Foundation, Lucknow, India..

By Anil K. Goel, Lucknow

The sacred lotus, known botanically as nelumbo nucifera (literally "nut-bearing aquatic"), comprises the most important and attractive wetland plant species in India. Occuring widely in temperate, sub-temperate, tropical and sub-tropical regions ranging from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, the flower has become

a symbol of India itself--the leaves representing the flourishing of surrounding cultures, religions and countries. The plant exhibits enormous phenotypic diversity, with numerous racial variants in different shapes, sizes and common shades of pink and white flowers having 16?160 petals. A pond of mature lotus is a stunning sight. Quite unlike water lilies, whose leaves rest on the water's surface, lotus leaves rise above the water on stems from 1 to 8 feet tall. And the flowers, 4 to 10 inches in diameter, usually rise above the leaves.

The lotus is the foremost symbol of beauty, prosperity and fertility. According to Hinduism, within each human inhabiting the earth is the spirit of the sacred lotus. It represents eternity, purity and divinity and is widely used as a symbol of life, fertility, ever-renewing youth and to describe feminine beauty, especially the eyes.

One of the most common metaphysical analogies compares the lotus' perennial rise to faultless beauty from a miry environment to the evolution of man's consciousness--from instinctive impulses to spiritual liberation. In the Bhagavad Gita, man is adjured to be like the lotus--he should work without attachment, dedicating his actions to God--untouched by sin like water on a lotus leaf and the beautiful flower standing high above the mud and water. In the postures of hatha yoga, the lotus position, padmasana, is adopted by those striving to reach the highest level of consciousness, which itself is found in the thousand-petalled lotus chakra at the top of the head. For Buddhists, lotus symbolizes the most exalted state of man--his head held high, pure and undefiled in the sun, his feet rooted in the world of experience.

The bloom of legends: Few flowers have found such prominence in legends and symbolism as the lotus. The Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religions have amassed a wealth of fascinating stories about the species. In Hinduism, the flower is said to be the center of the universe. There is a story that it arose from the navel of God Vishnu, and at the center of the flower sat Brahma. Each of the three Brahminical deities, Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Protector) and Siva (the Merger) are associated with this plant. The lotus is associated with Prajapati (Brahma) in the cosmogonic myths of the Brahmana portion of the Taittiriya Upanishad (800 bce). There are also accounts of the world born through a "Golden Lotus" and Padmakalpa, the Lotus Age in the Padmapurana (678 ce).

Trilok Chandra Majupuria of Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, explains in Religious and Useful Plants of Nepal and India (1989, M. Gupta, Lashkar, India), "The Taittiriya Brahmana describes how Prajapati, desiring to evolve the universe, which was then fluid, saw a lotus-leaf, pushkara parna, coming out of water. It is described that when divine life-substance was about to put forth the universe, the cosmic waters grew a thousand-petalled lotus flower of pure gold, radiant like the sun. This was considered to be a doorway, or an opening of the mouth of the womb of the universe. Hindu texts describe that water represents the procreative aspect of the Absolute, and the cosmic lotus, the generative. Thus, lotus is the first product of the creative principle." The role of Lord Brahma was to re-create the universe after the great flood on this planet. In order to create the universe, He used the different parts of the lotus plant.

Goddess Lakshmi, patron of wealth and good fortune, sits on a

fully bloomed pink lotus as Her divine seat and holds a lotus in Her right hand [see artwork, right]. It is also mentioned in the Mahabharata that Lakshmi emerged from a lotus which grew from the forehead of Lord Vishnu, and a garland of 108 lotus seeds is today used for the worship of Lakshmi. The Goddess of Power, Durga, was created by Lord Siva to fight demons and was adorned with a garland of lotus flowers by Varuna. Goddess of Wisdom, Saraswati is associated with the white Lotus. And virtually every God and Goddess of Hinduism--Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Parvati, Durga, Agni, Ganesha, Rama and Surya--are typically shown sitting on the lotus, often holding a lotus flower in their hand. The lotus which serves thus as the seat of the Deity, signifying their divinity and purity, is called padmasana or kamalasana.

In various regions of India, lotus blossoms are offered in worship of Lakshmi during Deepavali; to Durga in Durgapuja and to Lord Siva during Mahasivaratri. During these festivals, the demand for lotus flowers is great. The offering of lotus blooms to the Gods is also depicted through traditional mudras, hand gestures, in the introductory steps of classical Bharata Natyam, as well as other forms of Indian dance.

Scripture indicates at least a 6,000-year association of the lotus with Hindu culture and religion. It is given profound significance in mythology, epics, scriptures, Sanskrit literature and historical records, and it is the prevailing motif in sculptures, temple carvings, architecture, paintings and cave murals. Just one example is in Dayal Bagh, Agra, where the marble walls are carved with lotus flowers. Numerous references to the lotus can be found in the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, slokas, kathas and other ancient Sanskrit literature.

The most common Sanskrit names for lotus are Kamala, Padma and Pankaja, and Hindus have always considered the flower highly sacred.

Majupuria tells us, "Lotus is mentioned in the Rig Veda, and it finds frequent mention in the later Samhitas. In the Rig, two varieties are described: one white (Nelumbo nucifera), the other blue. In the Atharva Veda, the human heart is compared with the lotus flower. According to the Panchavimsa Brahmana, the flower is born of the light of constellations. In the Taittiriya, a garland of such lotuses, pundari sraga, is mentioned. The blue lotus, pushkara, is mentioned in several places in the Rig and still more in the other Vedas. It is alluded to grow in lakes and is compared to the bowl of the sacrificial ladle due to its shape. The common use of this variety for decoration is evident from the frequent descriptions of the Asvins, the youthful twin Gods of the dawn, wearing a garland of blue lotus and being called 'Pushkar Rajas.' "

Today, the blue lotus is extremely rare, possibly extinct. The East Indian lotus is an old-world Asiatic species, widely distributed to many Asiatic oriental countries, such as India, Japan, China, Korea, Thailand, Taiwan and North Australia. It is also naturalized in Hawaii and, reportedly, in the Volga River delta, where the Volga flows into Caspian sea.

Lord Buddha is said to have been born on a lotus leaf, and the lotus followed the spread of Buddhism to China and Japan. The relationship of the lotus flower with Hinduism extends beyond the recorded history of both the plant and the religion itself. The first fossilized record of the lotus has been recorded from

the Pleistocene epoch of Kashmir and subsequently from early Tertiary rock of India. The presence of Nelumbo in the Tertiary period of Assam is professed on the basis of a few impressions of leaves and rhizomes found in a collection from the Eocene bed near Damalgiri. These records provide strong evidence to support the prevalent view that this species is indigenous to the Indian subcontinent.

Seeds of Nelumbo are known to possess the maximum period of viability among all the flowering plant species. Lotus were once grown in Egypt. They are now extinct there, but seeds found in a pharaoh's tomb sprouted after centuries of storage. Today, lotus can be grown from seed and rhizomes purchased from nurseries or collected in the wild. In addition to its immense aesthetic and religious significance, this divinely benefic plant has much to offer the world medicinally and nutritionally, as food. [see page 35 hard copy]

THE LOTUS OF THE HEART:
Hindu scriptures say that the Atman dwells in the lotus within the heart. Visualize within yourself a lotus, centered right within the center of your chest, right within your heart. Try to mentally feel and see the heart as a lotus flower right within you. Within the center of the lotus, try to see a small light. Hindu scriptures state that the Atman within the heart looks like a brilliant light about the size of your thumb--just a small light. This light is an emanation of your effulgent being. It is dwelling right within. The Self God is deeper than that. The lotus is within the heart, and the Self God dwells deep within that lotus of light.

Goddess of the Lotus: Most Hindu Deities have names inspired by or associated with the lotus, most especially Lakshmi. She is commonly called:

Padmini, "possessing Lotus;"
Padmesthita, "standing on Lotus;"
Padmavarna, "Lotus colored;"
Padmasambhava, "Lotus born;"
Padmakshi, "eyes like Lotus;"
Padmanana, "face like Lotus;"
Sarasijanilaya, "dwells in lotus;"
Padmapriya, "fond of Lotus"
and Padmahasta, "holds a Lotus in her hand."

Sources of Lotus Seed and Rhizomes

THE POINCIANA TRADING POST, 55 STATION STREET, MULLUMBIMBY NSW 2482 AUSTRALIA; TEL: 612?6684?3811; E-MAIL: BOTANICA@MULLUM.COM.AU; WEB: HTTP://USERS.MULLUM.COM.AU/BOTANICA/INDEX.HTML EARTHCARE ENTERPRISES, PO BOX 500, MALENY, QLD, 4552 AUSTRALIA; TEL: 617?5494?4666; WEB: www.EARTHCARE.COM.AU/AQUATICS.HTM SBE, 3421 BREAM STREET, GAUTIER, MISSISSIPPI 39553 USA; FAX: 228?497?6544; WEB: www.SEEDMAN.COM/INDEX/NEWSEED.HTM LILYBLOOMS, 932 SOUTH MAIN STREET, NORTH CANTON, OHIO 44720 USA; TEL (US): 1-800-921-0005; WEB: HTTP://LILYBLOOMS.COM/WTRLOTUS.HTM; E-MAIL: LILYBLOOM@AOL.COM FLORIDA PLANTS ONLINE, 2440 EAST COMMERCIAL BOULEVARD, FT. LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA 33308 USA; TEL: 1-954-717-4487; (US ONLY) 1-888-284-5153; WEB: www.FLORIDAPLANTS.COM/STORE/LOTUS.HTM. ALSO CHECK OUT www.PLANTAMERICA.ORG/PALINK.HTM