

Paurāṇic Concept of Tulasī

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Trees and Plants are very vital for our existence. In India there are some sacred plants such as Tulasī, Banyan, Peepal (Aśvattha), Aśoka, Kadamba and the like. The Tulasī plant is an important symbol in the religious tradition of the Hindus. Tulasī or Vṛndā or Holy Basil (in english) is a very sacred aromatic plant. It is native to Indian sub-continent; it finds a very respectable place in Indian rituals of worship. And it is part and parcel of Indian religion and culture. This plant is considered to be the earthly manifestation of the goddess of Lakṣmī and also an eternal associate of Lord Viṣṇu.

Origin of Tulasī—The Paurāṇic background of the origin of the Tulasā plant has made the Tulasī especially spiritualistic because the goddess Lakṣmī herself has taken the form of Tulasī. This is an eternal divine manifestation of the beloved consort of Viṣṇu (or Hari or Nārāyaṇa) on this earth.

Several *Purāṇas* have eulogised the birth of Tulasī in details. The legends in the *Purāṇas* point to the divine significant origin of the importance of Tulasī plant for religious purposes. In simple words it is also said that Kṛṣṇā Tulasī is an incarnation of a cowherdess (*Gopī*) who was in deep love for Lord Kṛṣṇa. Rādhā, the beloved of Kṛṣṇa cursed her out of jealousy so she got herself manifested on

this earth forever to be offered to him. It is also said at one place that while churning the ocean, jewels were being taken out of the ocean. At that time Lord Viṣṇu felt great joy and from that joy of exertion in churning, the Tulasī plant has come up as His wife (कृष्णानन्दात् समुद्भूता क्षीरोदमथनोद्यमे ।).

One prominent story is that there were two brothers named Dharmadhvaja and Kuśadhvaja who lost all their wealth due to the curse of Sun. They did hard penances to propitiate the goddess of wealth. Kuśadhvaja was always engaged in meditation upon the goddess (देवी), a girl emerged out of his mouth; she was named Vedavatī and Sītā was the rebirth of Vedavatī.

The king Dharmadhvaja along with his wife Mādhavī, pleased Mahālakṣmī (goddess of wealth) entered the womb of Mādhavī who gave birth to a daughter named Tulasī (matchless) because of her inexplicable luminous beauty. This pretty girl desired that Viṣṇu alone should become her husband, so she abandoned all worldly pleasures and went to Badrikāśrama for doing austere penances. After a lapse of long time, Brahmā appeared before her and after knowing the reason of her penance, told her: “Devī, Sudāmā, a cowboy born of a part of Śrīkrṣṇa, was once cursed by Rādhā so he has taken birth as a demon named Śaṁkhachūḍa. He is eminently great and once he fell in love with you. Therefore first of all you will become his wife and then attain Nārāyaṇa as your consort. *At that time a part of your body will remain on earth as a plant named Tulasī.*” Moreover Brahmā granted the boon that Tulasī will become the holiest plant

and will be very dear to Viṣṇu. So much so that all the worship without Tulasī leaves would be fruitless.

The *Padma Purāṇa* gives a very lengthy account of the origin of Vṛndā or Tulasī. Vṛndā was the daughter of Kālanemī and she was married to Jālaṁdhara, son of Ocean. Śiva threw the fire of his anger from his forehead into the salt Ocean; it fell at the confluence of the river Gaṅgā and the ocean. That wrath of Śiva took the form of a very strong child; he could frighten the gods, demons and great serpents with his sound.

That Ocean's child, once caught hold of Brahmā's beard and repeatedly shook it. Unable to free himself, thus afflicted with pain when shaken, tears (water or जल) came out from the eyes of Brahmā. Since he held those tears from Brahmā's eyes, he became famous by the name Jālaṁdhara (who holds water). It is a very incongruous and ludicrous situation that Brahmā the creator is unable to free his beard from the child's hand. On account of his beard Brahmā is made a laughing stock and this makes the Jālaṁdhara's father Ocean laugh. But he was too mighty to be killed by any powerful one except Rudra. He was made invincible by his wife Vṛndā's chastity also. The Ocean was also overjoyed having Vṛndā as his son's wife. Jālaṁdhara was consecrated as the Lord of the rivers. Jālaṁdhara found out through his emissaries that all the gods have taken all the wealth of the Ocean from the churning process. He, angry and mightily wanted all the wealth back from the gods. Lord Viṣṇu wanted to fight with him with a great army but Lakṣmī, His wife, warned Viṣṇu not to kill him but can curse him, he brother. A

great fight ensued between Viṣṇu and Jālaṁdhara, who, finding him a great warrior, asked him to ask for a boon as a prize of his valour. Happy Jālaṁdhara asked Viṣṇu to stay in his house along with Lakṣmī, Viṣṇu stayed in the city of Jālaṁdhara. He ruled over three worlds, took control of jewels whatever belonged to the gods. All the gods and Śiva asked Viṣṇu: “Why did you not kill Jālaṁdhara in the battle?”

Afterwards all the gods led by Viṣṇu gave their own lustre by their coming together, Mahādeva fashioned an excellent weapon, the disc (चक्र) called Sudarshan (सुदर्शन), very fierce looking because of a series of flames. Then with the remaining lustre, Śiva made the thunderbolt. Just then Jālaṁdhara was seen at the root of the Kailāśa mountain. He deluded Śiva and Pārvatī also. Pārvatī was very fearful seeing him. Then she mentally recollected the great Viṣṇu. Then the goddess saw Him seated by her. She told Him about that. Every god knew that Jālaṁdhara was well-protected by his wife’s chastity, Śiva again went to kill him. Viṣṇu having gone to Jālaṁdhara’s house broke through his cover and decided to break the vow of chastity of Vṛndā. Vṛndā due to bad dreams and ill omens was afflicted with worries for her husband. Just then Māyā Jālaṁdhara (disguised Viṣṇu) with his mind pleased, embraced and kissed Vṛndā who was very much delighted to see her husband. When identified as Viṣṇu not Jālaṁdhara, she was very angry and cursed Viṣṇu. Though Viṣṇu prohibited Vṛndā not to have any mental attachment for him her husband who was killed by Śiva then. But Vṛndā entered fire. Then Viṣṇu remembering her

covered Himself with the ash of Vṛndā's funeral pyre and remained there only. He did not attain peace.

Jālaṁdhara took the form of Māyā Śiva and wanted to cheat the goddess. Śiva very angry having a fierce form speedily went to kill Jālaṁdhara. Śiva discharged Sudarshan Cakra bright like the sun resounding the earth, so the body of Jālaṁdhara when burnt off his head fell from his body, a lustre came out and merged with Śiva completely. That was an end of a great mighty Jālaṁdhara, husband of Vṛndā whose chastity was blemished by the cheating act of Viṣṇu, who really made her 'pure' and 'eternal' with his love for her.

All the gods overjoyed at his death, told Śiva about Viṣṇu's act. Deluded by Vṛndā's beauty Viṣṇu was stupefied.

The gods praised Mūla Prakṛti (Literally the original source). Those gods who were praising like this, saw in the sky (Māyā) abiding in an orb of lustre and pervading the atmosphere with a series of flames. At that time they all saw Bhāratī moving in the sky from its midst. She said: "I alone divided in three ways remain with the three constituents. My three forms are Gaurī, Lakṣmī and Svarā with *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas* (three *Guṇas*).” When the gods were hearing this, the lustre disappeared. Then the gods promptly went to the three goddesses and saluted them. Then they lovingly saw the gods and bowed down to them, their devotees.

The goddesses gave them the seeds and asked them to sow those seeds in that place where Viṣṇu remained. Then only their undertaking will succeed. From the seeds that

were sown there three plants – namely Dhātrī, Mālatī and Tulasī – came up. Dhātrī is said to have come up from Dhātrī (earth), Mālatī from Lakṣmī and *Tulasī* from Gaurī – all having the three qualities.

Then Viṣṇu, who was deluded by the excellence of Vṛndā's beauty seeing the herbs in the form of women got up in confusion. He saw them. Tulasī and Dhātrī also looked at Him, with love only. Due to the fascination of Vṛndā's beauty, God Viṣṇu looked upon the pleasure as superior to that derived from salvation and as giving greater happiness than derived from Lakṣmī. Then Mādhava Kṛṣṇa lost all her longing for Lakṣmī, for a while due to the beauty of Vṛndā.

In that forest of Vṛndāvana, Vṛndā turned into the form of Tulasī. That highly purifying arose from the sweat of Vṛndā on the earth.

अभूद् वृन्दावने तस्मिन् सा तुलसी रूपधारिणी ।
वृन्दाङ्गस्वेदतो भूम्यां प्रादुर्भूताति पावनी ॥

Having, enjoyed the pleasure due to the contact of Vṛndā's body, Viṣṇu thought about the mission of Śiva.

वृन्दासङ्गज चेदमनुभूय सुखं हरिः ।
दिनानि कतिचिन्मेने शिवकार्यं जगत्पतिः ॥

Lord Viṣṇu told Vṛndā that her husband was killed and then she should resort to Viṣṇu only. Viṣṇu forgot His grief and went to Vaikuṅṭha with all the goddesses and was saluted by all the gods.

Therefore Viṣṇu's worship is ordained at the root of Tulasī because it gives delight to Lord Viṣṇu. Vṛndā is Tulasī only, has always delighted Viṣṇu.

The name 'Tulasī' is more popular than Vṛndā. Tulasī has always delighted Viṣṇu.

The same story with a very little variation is found in the *Padma Purāṇa* again covering several chapters. Here Vṛndā is the beautiful daughter of Svarṇā, the celestial nymph. She got married to Jālamdhara. Mahāviṣṇu disguised as an ascetic lived with Vṛndā in an *Āśrama*. They lived there as husband and wife. But at the end of the sexual act Vṛndā found the ascetic instead of her husband Jālamdhara. She, a chaste lady, was shocked and stood up in anger. Then Mahāviṣṇu told her: "Vṛndā, I am Viṣṇu; your husband has gone to conquer Śiva and get Pārvatī for himself. I am Śiva also; we look different. Your husband had been killed in the battle. Join with me." Vṛndā got angry. She cursed Viṣṇu saying: "You cheated me by pretending to be an ascetic. Let your wife be cheated by a false ascetic." The cursed Viṣṇu disappeared. Vṛndā ended her life while doing penance. The nymphs made an image of her with the ashes from the funeral pyre and floated it on the river Gaṅgā. Tulasī having observed penance desired to have Hari as her husband but it was the curse of the sage Durvāsā that she married Śamkhāsura.

तुलसी च तपस्तप्त्वा वाञ्छं कृत्वा हरिं पतिम्।
दैवात् दुर्वाससः शापात् प्राप्य शंखासुरं प्रति॥

In all the accounts of the origin of Tulasī plant she is inseparably associated with Viṣṇu. Vṛndā as Tulasī as a plant has got eternal abode on the earth. She is a great devotee of Lord Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu. The devotees worship her in that form of a plant and she too serves Lord Viṣṇu in that form of a

plant. The offering of even a single leaf in the worship of Viṣṇu is enough to please Him.

Other details are the same as described above in the story of Jālandhara.

Religious Value – ‘Tulasī’ as the name stands for does signify ‘matchless’ or ‘an incomparable one’. For its religious and medicinal benefits, this plant is cultivated either in one’s house or near the house or in the centre of the house. Wherever in the forest or in the village or in the temple, there is Tulasī plant, the Lord of Universe Hari, very much pleased lives there. The place that is possessed of Tulasī plant becomes very auspicious. There is no poverty, no separation from the relatives, no misery, no fear and no disease. She removes all the calamities like a myrobalan (हरीतकी) removes the diseases.

दारिद्र्य भोगादि पापानि सुबहून्यपि ।
तुलसी हरते क्षिप्रं रोगानिव हरीतकी ॥

She is known as Vaiṣṇavī also. Amongst all the plants, she is the most dear to Lord Viṣṇu and all His incarnations. She is the abode of all the three gods; Brahmā lives at the root, Janārdana in the middle and Rudra lives in the branches of the plant.

तस्य मूले स्थितिं ब्रह्मा मध्ये देवो जनार्दनः ।
मञ्जर्या वसते रुद्रस्तुलसी तेन पावनी ॥

All the holy places like Puṣkara, all the rivers like Gaṅgā and all the gods dwell in the leaf of Tulasī. The image of Viṣṇu brings every kind of success and gives fame also

(सर्वसिद्धिकरा मूर्तिः कृष्णः कीर्ति ददाति च). Formerly even the goddesses used to propitiate Tulasī plant. The goddess Pārvatī had planted a hundred Tulasī plants on the Himālaya for Śaṅkara; she is worthy of salutations. Due to its being planted on the earth, she is always keeping the proximity of the god Viṣṇu.

When the Tulasī plant is devoutly worshipped Lord Viṣṇu pacifies portents, fearful diseases and many ill omens. Wherever the wind goes after taking the wonderful fragrance of Tulasī, all the ten quarters get purified. Actually speaking, this plant purifies the whole ambience. Therefore, of all kinds of leaves, Tulasī is always dear to Viṣṇu at all times.

सर्वेषां पत्रजातीनां तुलसी केशवप्रिया ।
सर्वदा सर्वकालेषु तुलसी विष्णुवल्लभा ॥

Tulasī is auspicious if she is worshipped in these nine ways – seen, touched, smelt, meditated upon, described, praised, planted, sprinkled and worshipped. Those who are thus devoted to the plant attain religious merit lasting for thousands of crores of yugas.

That merit which exists in offering all flowers and leaves, is obtained by offering a Tulasī leaf in the month of Kārttika. Tulasī herself is a great devotee of Lord Kṛṣṇa; she serves Kṛṣṇa in the form of a plant and the worshippers adore her in that form of a plant. Everything of Tulasī including leaves fruits, roots, branches, skin and stem is purifying so also the clay where this plant grows –

पत्रं पुष्पं फलं मूलं शाखा त्वक् स्कन्धसंज्ञितम् ।
तुलसीसंभवं सर्वं पावनं मृत्तिकादिकम् ॥

Those men in this world are lucky, in whose houses there exists the Tulasī plant in this Kali age. Those tender hands which gather Tulasī leaves and those who plant Tulasī for Viṣṇu are lucky on this earth. Even Yama can't do any harm to those who have worshipped Viṣṇu with Tulasī leaf. Tulasī burns all the sins when used at the time of bathing. That worship of Viṣṇu which a man does after collecting Tulasī leaves with his sacred prayers is a lakh crore times meritorious. Not only this, but all the hymns and prayers become eternal when they are recited in the proximity of Tulasī plants. Since formerly Viṣṇu held Tulasī on His head, so she has become very pure and meritorious having reached His limbs.

The *Purāṇas* have glorified the Tulasī plant, its wood and its leaves to that extent that those whose bodies are burnt with the Tulasī wood get freed from the sins they committed. And also he on whose dead body, the Tulasī wood is placed and who is cremated after doing so is freed from the multitude crore of sins and freed also from thousands of crores of existences. The gods feel happy, drop handful of flowers, celestial damsels sing songs. And thus Viṣṇu and Śiva are pleased.

Tulasī plant is eulogised so much in the *Purāṇas* that even after having heard the importance or glory of Tulasī, one is free from sin from his birth to death. The planting of Tulasī plant is *Dāna*, all the gods and sacred places dwell in the plant.

Generally two kinds of Tulasī leaves are found. One is Rāma Tulasī that has slightly bigger light green leaves,

where as Śyāma Tulasī is having small dark green leaves. A man, a devotee of Viṣṇu who especially worships Viṣṇu with leaves of Tulasī – Kṛṣṇa-Gaurā, would become Viṣṇu or like Him himself –

तुलसी कृष्णगौराख्यातयाभ्यर्च्य मधु द्विषम्।
विशेषेण हरेर्भक्तो नरो नारायणो भवेत्॥

Vṛndāvana – According to the *Brahmavaivartta Purāṇa*, there was a very religious and noble king named Kedāra. He had one daughter named Vṛndā whose duty was matchless inexplicable; she did penance for sixty thousand years to attain Lord Kṛṣṇa and solicited Him (आविर्बभूव श्रीकृष्णस्तत्पुरो भक्तवत्सलः।). He came before eyes Himself for her. She for a long time enjoyed with Him and went to Goloka; she was like Rādhā, the best amongst the Gopīs (cowherdresses). The place where she observed penances is known as Vṛndāvana –

ओमित्युक्त्वा च रहसि चिरं रेमे तया सह।
सा जगाम च गोलोकं कृष्णेन सह कौतुकात्॥
राधा समा सा सौभाग्याद् गोपीश्रेष्ठा बभूव।
वृन्दा यत्र तपस्तेपे तत्तु वृन्दावनं स्मृतम्॥

One of sixteen names of Rādhā is Vṛndā, therefore that place is known as Vṛndāvana. And also it is said that the place where Vṛndā abandoned her body and went to Brahmaphata was Vṛndāvana near Govardhana –

यत्र वृन्दा परित्यज्य देहं ब्रह्मपथं गता।
आसीद् वृन्दावनं तत्र गोवर्धन समीपतः॥

Tulasī and Śālagrāma – At one place it is said that Vṛndā or Tulasī obtained the form of a tree due to the curse

of Hari and Hari became the Ammonite stone (*Śālagrāma Śilā*) because of her curse –

सा चैव हरिशापेन वृक्षरूपा सुरेश्वरी।
तस्याः शापेन च हरिः शालग्रामो बभूव ह॥

Therefore she, the matchless beauty, always remains on the top of the stone (तथा तस्थौ च सततं शिलावक्षसि सुन्दरी।). Those people having Tulasī for the daily worship of the Śālagrāma stone, are lucky. Thus Tulasī would be Viṣṇu's consort eternally. Where there is Salagrama stone, Viṣṇu remains present there; the image of Kṛṣṇa brings about every kinds success and gives fame also –

सर्वसिद्धिकरा मूर्तिः कृष्णः ददाति च।
शालग्रामशिला यत्र तत्र संनिहितो हरिः॥

Some rituals of worship – First of all it is to be mentioned that in Hindu temples the two, the plant and the stone are married in the month of Kārttika annually. This marriage is celebrated with all pomp and show on the eleventh of the bright half of Kārttika or on *Hari Prabodhinī Ekādaśī*. At some place it has become customary.

The *Purāṇa* mentions one *Tulasī Trirātra Vrata* or vow of three nights of Tulasī. In this vow there is worship of the image of Viṣṇu with Lakṣmī in the vicinity of Tulasī grove, or at the root of Tulasī. All the rituals of bathing, saluting etc. are done to please Viṣṇu and to obtain Viṣṇu's favour. The *Vratin* waters Tulasī with the following verse –

तुलसी सहितो देव सदा शङ्खेन संयुतम्।
गृहाणार्घ्यं मया दत्तं देवदेव नमोऽस्तु ते॥

“O God, you with Tulasī, please accept this material of worship always accompanied by a conch, offered by me. O Lord of gods, my salutations to you.”

There is a practice in traditional Hindu homes that the devotees, generally the female ones, water the plants and pay obeisance to Tulasī. The two salutation verses are as follows –

- (1) वृन्दायै तुलसी देव्यै प्रियायै केशवस्य च ।
विष्णुभक्तिप्रद देवि सत्यवत्यै नमो नमः॥
- (2) महाप्रसाद जननि सर्वसौभाग्यवर्धनी ।
आधिव्याधिहरा नित्यं तुलसी तुभ्यं नमोऽस्तुते॥

In the month of Vaiśākha and Kārttika especially the lamp is lighted at the root with purity of mind and body. Generally the worshippers do circumambulate (प्रदक्षिणा) Tulasī plant while singing the following prayer –

यानि कानि च पापानि ब्रह्महत्यादि कानि च ।
तानि तानि प्रनश्यन्ति प्रदक्षिण पदे पदे॥

By the circumambulation of Tulasī, all the sins, one might have committed, are destroyed at every step even the sin of killing a Brāhmaṇa.

The following hymn or *stotra* is sung to please Tulasī –

तुलस्यमृत जन्मासि सदा त्वं केशवप्रिये ।
केशवार्थं चिनोमि त्वां वरदा भव शोभने॥
त्वदङ्गसम्भवैर्नित्यं पूजयामि यथा हरिम् ।
तथा कुरु पवित्राङ्गि कलौ मल विनाशिनि॥

“O Tulasī, you re born immortal; O’ you, who are always dear to Viṣṇu, I am looking out for you for Viṣṇu; O you, virtuous one, be a granter of bons, O’ you of a pure form do

that by which I shall daily worship Viṣṇu with leaves produced from your body; O you, destroy the dirt of sin in the Kali age.

That worship of Viṣṇu, which a man does after collecting Tulasī leaves with this sacred prayer is a lakh crore times meritorious. O' Supreme goddess, the best gods sing your glory.”

The worship of Viṣṇu is considered incomplete without Tulasī leaves.

One *Purāṇa* prohibits the offering of Tulasī leaves in the worship of Gaṇeśa. Once Tulasī was fascinated by the personality of Gaṇeśa, she mocks at him and afterwards expressed her desire to obtain him as husband. He declined to marry ever and so Tulasī cursed him to have wife. Gaṇeśa cursed her saying that she will be tormented by the demons and afterwards become tree due to the association of great persons. Hearing that Tulasī was miserable and cried. Gaṇeśa pitied her and said: “You will be the substantial part of the flowers, will be very dear to Lord Kṛṣṇa and will play a main role in the ritualistic worship of Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu.” But it is because of this enmity between the two, that Tulasī leaves are not offered in the rituals of worship of Śrī Gaṇeśa.

Medicinal Value: Prevention is better than cure. With this in mind in India, people do believe in “*Dadī-Nānī ke Nuskhe*” or in certain Home Remedies. The beneficial use of those prescriptions is tested and coming from generations. Generally this is also believed that one should avoid the intake of antibiotics as far as possible because those medicines have side effects.

Some bodily ailments like cough, cold, stomach disorder and the like can be treated with the Tulasī leaves as home medicine before consulting the doctor. In homes, tea is prepared while boiling water with few tea leaves, Tulasī leaves, ginger, cardamon and black pepper and *Dālachinī*. All this boiled tea mixed with some milk and sugar, is given to the patient twice or thrice in a day for good relief from cold and also to avoid the effects of severe cold winter, people keep drinking this tea.

When the diseases like Malaria and Dengue are quite widespread in the country during rainy season, the Tulasī leaves boiled with tea leaves and some other herbs act as preventive against these fevers. Sometimes a decoction of the leaves with powdered cardamon in a glass of water, mixed with sugar or honey or milk is useful in bringing down the high fever. Some '*Kāḍhā*' is made out of the leaves.

For children suffering from bad cough, first of all, juice of Tulasī leaves and ginger mixed with honey is given before trying other medicines.

Chewing a few Tulasī leaves early in the morning is considered to be antiviral or flu. Even the doctors have full faith in the efficacy of Tulasī leaves. Some have faith that the chewing of the leaves of Śyāma Tulasī particularly are useful in curing or preventing incurable disease like cancer. It seems to be a wishful thinking. The tender leaves are said to be the nerve tonic and help in sharpening the memory too. These leaves are the main constituents of the Syrups in Āyurvedic medicines.

In the end, it is for sure that Tulasī leaves are air-purifying and the aroma carried by the wind in the atmosphere does clean the air as well as becomes repellent for some insects and mites to some extent. In distant villages, where the medicinal help is hardly available at short notice, the tender leaves of Tulasī are used very frequently.

Hence, the intake of Tulasī leaves as medicine for prevention of certain small ailments is not harmful of course, if it is not the only curable medicine.

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