

## Palmyrah Palm and Tamilnadu

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**Abstract :** Palmyrah palm, the state tree of tamilnadu has a very long history in the tamil society. It is interconnected with the every aspect of lives of ancient tamils. All flourishing tamil literatures was written with the help of palm leaves called “olaisuvadi”. Palm tree also had immense economic and medicinal values. But the foremost value of palm tree is its environmental importance. So only our ancestors give a special place to palm tree from ancient times. It was the reason that palmyrah is seen in entire tamilnadu from fertile agricultural places to dry tracts and plains. But now the present generation not showing any interest towards the conservation of palm tree and its work. Thus, the importance of palm tree in ancient tamilnadu is summarised here.

### **Introduction**

The Palmyrah Palm is the only tree which is interconnected with ancient Tamil society in a large scale. Every primary needs of the ancient Tamil society was fulfilled by this tree. Palmyra is one of the trees which are found in large numbers in the boundaries of agricultural fields and has been associated with farmers and local people of Tamilnadu since olden days.. Cultivation of tree species on agricultural boundaries in association with field crops is an age old practiced system in Indian agriculture system. Likewise, the farmers in Tamilnadu also grow trees in their agricultural boundaries from their ancient past. The primary and important tree in this regard is palmyrah palm. It is found in the plains along the riverbanks and coastal areas and grows on every type of wasteland including rocky areas. Every part of the palm tree is useful. It is a source of food, a sweet drink (pathaneer), Jaggery( Karuppatti), sugar (panamkalkandu), toddy, medicine and wood. These leaves of palmyrah is called as “Olai”. It is used for thatching, making umbrellas, fans, diaper articles, hats, etc., and its fibre is used for making baskets, brushes and brooms.The palmyrah in

tamilnadu normally grows to a height of 20-23 m, with a black cylindrical stem. Palmyra tree is a versatile tree because of its immense benefits to mankind in a manner that no part of the tree can be considered as a waste. In Tamilnadu, more than 50% of palms are concentrated in the southern districts of Thoothukudi, Thirunelveli, Virudhunagar and Ramnad districts, while Thoothukudi district alone has a major share of 10 million palms. These palm trees provides opportunity for increasing the employment and also provide a source of income to the poor in the rural areas since ancient days.

### **Botanical Description**

Palmyrah is called as tree. But originally it belongs to a grass family (Arecaceae). The scientific name of palmyrah palm is *Borassus Flabellifer*. Palmyra trees are tall with a cylindrical stem that has scars due to fallen leaves. These trees are dioecious which are growing up to 30 m tall. Its trunk is straight, thick, and black-coloured with crown of leaves on the top of the tree. The leaves of palmyrah are large, fan-shaped, up to 3 m, cleft into many lobes and rigidly coriaceous. The petioles which bear the leaves are long with hard and it had spinescent serratures at margins. Inflorescence is called as spadix. The flowers are unisexual. Male flowers are minute, mixed with scaly bracteoles, sunk in cavities between large overlapping leaves, or truncate bracts. Female flowers are solitary, scattered on a sparingly branched spadix. Fruits are drupe and trigonous when young; (sub)globose when mature. The palmyrah seeds are composed of white fleshy pulp which is gradually harden at maturity. These plants are propagated only by seeds.

### **Palm tree as Source of Tamil literature**

In reconstructing the ancient history of Tamilnadu, an amazing wealth of source material is provided by Tamil literature. These all literatures were written in the palm leaves. All the important orders of the king was also recorded in palm leaf manuscripts. This palm leaves records contains details of social habits, custom, religious institutions and practices and developments of arts and education. Only with the help of palm leaf records, the picture of Tamil society was clearly visible now. The social history, economic history and religious history of Tamils was well recorded through these palm leaf records. By this way, palm leaves not only producing a social revolution, but also serves as the primary thing of ancient

Tamil Civilization by producing many Tamil literatures. All the activities of entire Tamil society from ordinary men to king was well recorded in palm leaves. For this purpose, we are indebted to palmyrah tree. When paper was not in use for writing purposes, palmyrah leaves only were used for note making and record writing. In Tamil, they were called 'OlaiSuvadi' meaning palm leaf manuscript. The Tamil literatures also speaks much about the palmyrah and it is various parts including leaves, Trunk, Karuppatti and very important kallu. Especially the usage of Kallu and barter system using Kallu was mentioned in Natrinai, purananuru, and perumbanaatrupadai etc., It is significant that, if there is no palm leaf records, there is no history of Tamils, In discern the Tamil literature, palmyrah is considered as the tree of (coastal area) Neidal. Even thirukural also speaks about the greatness of Palm tree.

### **Economic Benefits**

Palm tree has large number of economical values. The timber obtained from palm tree stem is heavy, strong, durable and very hard, but poor in toughness. The wood is used for pillars, posts, poles, foot- bridges, fencing, well-sweeps, etc., Extraction of fibre from palmyrah palm is an age –old cottage Industry in India. In Tamil Nadu, the production is intensive in Ramanathapuram, Thirunelveli, Kanyakumari, Coimbatore and salem districts. Thoothukudi is major exporting centre and the best fibre is produced from Thoothukudi district. PalmyrahFibres are one of the heaviest Fibres. Fibres from the petiole and its base are used in the manufacture of brushes of different shapes, brooms, ropes, twines, fencing and reapers.This Fibre is also used for brush-making. It is also used for making Cradles, doormats, mats, for making cushions, different types of baskets, hats etc., and also for fuel. The palmyrah leaves is used for both domestic and ornamental purposes. With the help of palm leaves, numerous artefacts and decoration items are made. From the help of sangam literature, we came to know that toddy serves as one of the important diet in the Tamil society. From lower class to upper class people, all of them drink toddy. Men Women, bards, soldiers and king very much liked this. This was not exported to any foreign countries. But, it forms as one of the important in internal trade. Barter system was prevalent in that days. So people in one region exchanged toddy with other region people and get other things. The people in Neidhal region give Fish to toddy tappers and got toddy from them. Palmyrah wood is carefully cut out, shaped and polished could be used for making furniture. There was

a time when the wealth of a person was estimated in terms of the number of palmyrah trees owned and the quantity of jaggery they produced. Mats made of palmyrah leaves are used by people for numerous purposes. Every part of palm tree is useful in one or some other way. Its leaves can be used for the making of mats, baskets, fans, hats, umbrellas, and also as writing material. Its trunk which is black in colour is hard and strong so can be used for the construction of buildings and bridges. Various types of products can be prepared by using the Palmyrah palm. Stalks of the Palmyrah palm is used in making of fences in ancient tamilnadu. It continues till now in villages.

### **Medicinal Benefits**

From the ancient days, palm tree products are used to cure many diseases. In tamilnadu, palm tree products are both used as food and medicine by our ancestors. Palm candy is considered as a delicacy. It is reputed to possess medicinal properties, and is used in coughs and pulmonary affections, and as a laxative for children. The fresh toddy is a nutritious supplement to diets which are deficient in iron, ascorbic acid and vitamin –B complex. The nutritive value of the toddy depends upon the sugars and yeast present in it. It is prescribed for digestive troubles and sometimes in chronic gonorrhoea, slightly fermented juice is given in diabetes. It also cures ulcer as well. It is suggested that Palm jaggery should be prescribed for diseases characterized by a marked loss of potassium, and also as a diuretic. It is more nutritious than cane sugar. The palmyrah tuber cures heat, venereal diseases and cools body, improves beauty and also cures anxiety, mental confusion, fungal infection, urinary diseases and dysentery. Palm candy cures loss of taste, Gastric ulcer, Fever delirium and burning sensation in chest. Palm jaggery is the important ingredient in Siddha, Ayurveda and Unani medicines. Nunku cures all the summer related diseases. Nunku is also used to increase the digestion, cures small pox, stomach related problems and prickly heat and other heat related problems. Palm candy makes body cool, improves the wealth of voice, cure the burning eyes, dry cough and urinary tract diseases. Tuber is rich in fiber. The calcium found in Karuppatti makes one's bones stronger. It also purifies human body. There have been several scientific studies which reveal the medicinal uses of the Palmyra trees. All parts of the plant are credited with high medicinal values. The roots are cooling, restorative and diuretic. The pathaneer and toddy are good for controlling gastric troubles and ulcers. The inflorescences are widely used in Ayurvedic medicines. The fruits are cooling, laxative,

anthelmintic and sedative. They are used as an aperient and to improve the digestion. The pulp from the ripe fruit is applied externally for skin diseases.

### **Environmental Benefits**

Though palmyrah have immense economical and medical benefits, it had environmental benefits which is not expected from other tree. Palmyrah is seen on the banks of lakes, ponds and rivers. Even it is seen amidst the Farm fields. So it is clear that our ancestors had a plan to choose palm tree because of its nurturing ability of water resource in any type of land. palmyrah has branch rootlets. So, it helps to stop the soil erosion. It also strengthen the banks of lakes. Palmyrah is also an asylum of many bird varieties. Many birds came and live in this palm tree. With the help of ordure of numerous birds, different type of plants started growing near palm tree. This lead to formation of small forests near palm trees. It helps to protect environment and helps to rain in that place. Palm tree also helps to preserve rain water and it is resilient to drought. Palmyrah grows in arid and partially arid zones with zero fertilizer hence it gives 100% residue free organic food and palm toddy. The traditional houses covered with palmyrah leaves are eco-friendly and give coolness in summer season. Many handicraft product produced by the palm leaf are also eco-friendly. In ancient days old palm leaf is used as organic manure for fields. In Tamilnadu, it can grow in all types of soil. Deep sandy and loamy soil is preferable. Minimum sunlight is required for its growth and development. An annual rainfall of 750mm is only required for its growth. Instead it doesn't take more water, it save lot of water under its feet. It help the other plants located near palm tree to grow in a quick manner. So, our ancestors plant palm trees near wells which is used for agriculture, because it helps to raise the water level in wells. The palmyrah sometimes act as a windbreak for the plains. Palmyrah play an important role in controlling natural disasters, soil erosion, soil fertility maintenance, water conservation, landscaping, ecosystem services and biodiversity conservation.

### **As Source of Food**

The palm tree forms the important source of food in the ancient tamil society. The palm toddy forms the important diet of coastal tamil people, but also very much consumed by the people of other regions. It is used in all the seasons. The fresh toddy is a cheap, refreshing

and delicious beverage, with an agreeable flavor. The working class people take it as a health drink every morning. It is extensively consumed by the poor people in fairly large quantities from the ancient tamil society. It does not cause any harm. The convention that is in vogue in the district is that tappers supply palmyrah juice free of cost to any passer-by who is hungry or thirsty. The sweet palm candy (panamkalkandu) is directly produced from the sap. The clarified raw juice is boiled down as in the manufacture of jaggery, but not to such a high degree of concentration the boiled sap is then poured into pots, which are covered and buried underground for some months, when crystals of sugar candy form. The tender fruits obtained from palm tree is called Nonku. These are much relished during the summer and form a cooling, delicious and filling food. These are cut into pieces and eaten by Child. The ripe fruit also be taken as food. These juicy ripe pulp is eaten raw, but the ripen fruits are generally roasted on direct fire, the fleshy layer removed and the thick syrupy matter consumed. The most important food item obtained from palm trees are karuppatti (palm jaggery). From ancient days, a considerable quantity of palm jaggery is consumed as food by the poor class in Tamil Nadu. It is the only sugar in ancient days. Any foods made with sweet taste needs karuppatti. By the use of karuppatti, tamil people was proficient in making many sweet snacks. The tubers obtained from palmyrah seeds is also a delicious one and important food item of tamils.

### **Sacred Tree**

In southern Tamil Nadu, especially in the Districts of Thoothukudi, Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari, Palmyrah is considered as goddess Badhrakali. The toddy from palmyrah is said to be milk of Kali. So, Palmrah climbers claimed himself as the child of Badhrakali. In some places, palm tree is worshipped as god. In some of the Shiva temples in Tamil Nadu, palmyrah is seen as Thalaviruksha (Temple Tree). Nowadays, a place of karuppatti was taken away by sugar. But in ancient times the only sugar and sugar related sweets was made up of karuppatti. So, at that time, the prasadam in temples was also not made without the help of palmyrah tree. The palmyrah palm is one of the trees looked upon by the Hindus with veneration. Palm tree is called as Kalpavriksha of the vedic writings, being regarded as the symbol of vegetation, of universal life, and of immortality. The kingly garland used by the chera kings was always of palm tree inflorescence, a garland knitted of the little yellow flowers of the male palm tree.

### **Threats and Remedial Measures**

The two great threats alarmed palm trees in tamilnadu is the destruction of palmyrah tree and its work. So there is immediate counter actions needed for the progress of palm tree and its work. Because it is interconnected very closely with tamil society in ancient times. The some of the important factors responsible for the destruction of palmyrah in tamilnadu are as follows. This work is a risky and high labourious work. So, the workers disliked this work. So, they don't permit their younger generation to enter into this work. Due to various socio-economic reasons and difficulty to climb tall trees the younger generation is not showing interest to carry out this industry. So, the medicinal profits available to Tamil society is unavailable in future. Technology is the main obstacle that is restraining the industry. To stop this, various new technologies will be adopt in palmyrah work. There is no one great organizations to unite the Palmyrah climbers so as to protect the interests of palmyrah climbers. Ancient tamil society was intertwined with palm tree and its products. At that time, there is no plastic or any other metals, palm tree products was only in majority of the domestic and other uses in tamil society. But with the advent of modern civilization, palmyrah products don't get any attraction. The cutting of palm trees for various reasons was the primary reason for destroying of palm trees. Prevention of the cutting of the trees through passing the legislation. Today due to lack of knowledge about the commercial importance and socioeconomic advantages the people are cutting toddy palm trees on a massive scale and due to which the tree population is declining day by day. So, Proper steps have to be taken to stop cutting palms and to replant these incredible palm trees through awareness amongst people.

### **Conclusion**

Palm tree lives once when palm based work continues. If palmyrah work is going to be ceased, it means the condition of palm tree also in edge. So there is a need to protect both the palmyrah and its industry in rural areas. Unlike other trees, all the parts of palm tree is useful to mankind. The leaves, fruits, stem, petiole and inflorescence are all useful. Nothing is going to waste in palm tree. So, our ancestors called it as World's 'KarpagaVirutcham'. In ancient Tamil Nadu, palm tree is a tree of economic, religious, medicinal and environmental

importance. But today there is a great threat to the palmyrah and its industry in the name of globalization. Now, Palm tree loss its economic importance, medicinal importance, environmental and also sacred importance. This is great loss to the tamilnadu and tamil society only. But unknowing the importance of palm tree, cutting down of palm trees went rapidly in Tamil Nadu. Knowing the importance of palm tree in tamil society from ancient past, Government of Tamil Nadu announced palm tree as the state tree in 1978. But now government of tamilnadu also showing no interest for the improvement of palmyrah palm and its industry. In this Stage, we considered palm tree as a tree of environmental importance, religious importance and cultural significant tree to promote or revive its ancient importance for the betterment of Tamil society.

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