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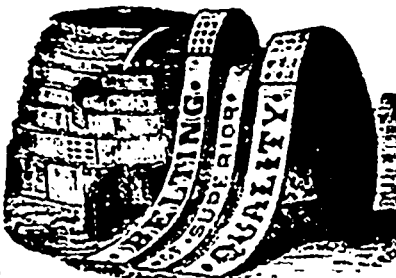
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THE BOTANICAL MYTHOLOGY OF THE HINDOOS.

At a recent meeting of the Anthropological Society of Bombay Dr. Dymoke read a very interesting paper entitled, "The Flowers of the Hindoo Poets," in the course of which he referred to the mythical conceptions which have gathered round trees and plants in the minds of the Hindoos. The ancient Eastern poets saw in the tree a similitude with the heavens and with the human form; in the "Gilagovinda" a comparison is drawn between the clouds and the thick, dark foliage of the Tamala. These fancies gave rise to the numerous poetical myths concerning the tree of life, of knowledge, of the Amrita or Ambrosia, as well as those concerning cosmogonic and anthropogonic trees. The Soma or Amrita is represented as the king of plants, the eternal essence which constantly sustains and renews the life of plants and animals; it is the symbolical drinking of this eternal essence as a holy ceremony to which constant allusion is made in the Vedas:—

"We've quaffed the Soma bright,
And are immortal grown.
We've entered immortal light,
And all the gods have known."

— Rigveda, viii.

The Amrita appears in various forms in stories and legends. A famous poet says that the drop (Svedavindu) which fell into the shell became a pearl; in the mouth of the black snake it became poison, and in the flower of the plantain nectar. Several plants bear this name, and are supposed to be endowed with an extra particle of the eternal essence; among others, the Neem, on which account the Hindoos, on their New Year's Day, eat the leaves of this tree, upon the supposition that the Amrita contained in them will insure longevity. In Hindoo flower lore the large black bee (Boramara) plays an important part; he is the inconsistent lover, who delights in gathering sweets from every flower. The queen of Indian flowers is the lotus. The Hindoo compares the newly created world to a lotus flower floating upon the waters, and it thus becomes symbolical of spontaneous generation.

The golden lotus of Brahminic and Buddhist mythology is the sun, which floats in the waters which are above the firmament, like an earthly lotus in the deep blue stream below. From it distils the Amrita, the first manifestation of Vishnu Brahma and Buddha (the supreme intelligence) were born of this heavenly lotus. Lakshmi, the Indian Venus, is represented sitting on this flower. The Hindoos see in the form of the lotus the mysterious symbol Svastika. The allusions to this flower by Indian poets are innumerable. No praise is too extravagant for it; it is the chaste flower, and its various synonyms are bestowed as names upon women. The red lotus is said by the poets to be dived with the blood of Siva that flowed from the wound made by the arrow of Kam, the Indian Cupid. The face of a beautiful woman is compared by the poets to a lotus blossom, the eyes to lotus buds, and the arms to lotus filaments. The bee is represented as enamored of the lotus. Although a humble little flower, the Tulsi is almost as great a favorite as the lotus; it is addressed to the goddess Sri or Venus. The heart of Vishnu is said to tremble with rage if a branch of his beloved is injured. The plant must be gathered only for medicinal or religious purposes, such as the worship of Vishnu or Krishna, or the wife of Siva. It is a kind of amrita, symbolical of the eternal essence; it protects the worshippers and gives children to women. The plant is often worshipped as a domestic deity, and its branches are placed on the breasts of the dead. The Champa is chiefly celebrated for its overpoweringly sweet odor and golden color; so strong is its perfume that the poets affirm that bees will not extract honey from it; but they console it for this neglect by dedicating it to Krishna, who loves garlands of yellow flowers as becoming to his dark complexion.

One of the greatest favorites of the poets is the Asoka; its flowers, which are yellow when they first open, gradually change to red. In March and April it is in its glory, and at night perfumes the air with its delicate odor. The tree is the kul or anthropogonic tree of the Vaisya caste, who call it Asupala.

The Kadamba (Anthocephalus cadamba) is sacred to Kali or Parvati, the consort of Siva; it has many synonyms, such as "Protecting Children," "Dear to Agriculturists," etc. It blossoms at the end of the hot season, and its high-scented flowers form a globular orange-colored head, from which the white-clubbed stigmas project. The flowers are fabled to impregnate with their honey the water which collects in holes in the trunk of the tree.

In Delhi the goldsmiths are fond of imitating the flowers. The well-known prickly gold beads so often seen in Delhi jewellery are meant for kadamba flowers. In this part of India the Marathas will not gather the flowers for profane purposes, as it is their anthropogonic tree. The Kadamba Rajas claim their descent from it, as recorded in the following legend:— "After the destruction of the demon Tripura, a drop of perspiration fell from the head of Isvara into a hollow of a kadamba tree, and assumed the form of a man with three eyes and four arms. He became the founder of Vanavasi or Tayantipur." There are other versions of the story, but all agree in enunciating the origin of the family with this tree, a branch of which is necessary to request the Kai at a Marathi marriage ceremony.

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