

Fiery Chinar

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Chinar leaf in the month of November

As October draws to a close, a crimson tinge starts appearing on the green leaves of some huge trees in the Kashmir valley. Come November and these huge magnificent trees seem to have caught fire. Soon, the flames spread across the Himalayan province, and by the middle of the month the tree is at its magnificent best. The magnificent Chinar with its breathtaking and incredible beauty has to be seen to be believed.

The Chinar tree stands tall, witness to innumerable natural calamities and braving hot summer days to chilly winter nights and rainy spring showers to breezy autumn with equanimity. The Chinar is called *Bouin* in the Kashmiri language, a broken down word of Sanskrit 'Bhawani', the Goddess who has been worshipped in Kashmir since long. The Chinar tree is an integral part of Kashmiri culture. Almost every village and town in the valley has a Chinar tree. One can experience cool breeze under the shadow of this majestic tree. The spectacle of the Chinar-fire ignites the landscape of the valley as much as the imagination of those who happen to witness it.

The large hollow trunks have been used by meditators for meditation over time and are thus considered sacred and planted generally at places of worship. Later, during the Muslim era times it continued to be a major

garden and landscape tree and dominates many historic gardens even today. A famous landmark in Srinagar being an island on Dal Lake where four Chinar trees stand, named Char Chinar. A Chinar tree in Chittergam Chadura village in Budgam district of Central Kashmir, which could be the oldest in Asia, has a girth of 31.85 m at ground level and 14.78 m at breast height.

The Chinar tree of Kashmir is mentioned in a remarkable book *A Dictionary of Kashmiri Proverbs and Sayings* by James Hinton Knowles (1885), Sir Walter Lawrence's book *Valley of Kashmir* (1895) and in *The Kashmir Gazetteer* (1889-1895 A.D. Vol I, Chapter IV Flora, Page 79). In the *Akbarnama* written by Abul Fazal, it is mentioned, "The emperor took 34 persons inside the hollow trunk of an aged Chinar tree".

The Majestic Tree

Chinar, *Platanus orientalis kashmeriana*, is the only species of family Platanaceae found in India and growing throughout the Kashmir valley. The Platanaceae consists of only a single living genus *Platanus*, of six to ten species of tall trees, and is a native of the eastern Mediterranean region from where it spread eastwards.

Chinar grows up to a height of 30 m and a girth exceeding 12 m in certain cases. The bark is greyish and leaves are borne alternately on the stem, deeply 5-7 lobed with 12-20 cm length, and palmate or maple-like with long stalk. Flowers are dense spherical heads, monoecious and unisexual.

Every year, around the time when autumn is about to say goodbye to the valley, Kashmiris eagerly look forward to this elegant tree although it stands out in



Chinar leaves in Spring



Chinar Fruits

Glory of Chinar trees at Naseem Bagh, Srinagar



Char Chinar in the famous Dal Lake in Srinagar in full blaze in November

A recent ban has been enforced to curb cutting of Chinar trees. Chinar trees are now being registered and are considered national property of the state.

its majesty among the entire plant species throughout the year. The colour change is due to gradual decrease in temperature and consequent reduction in chlorophyll content in the leaves. The process unveils two pigments of carotenes and xanthophylls, otherwise camouflaged by the chlorophyll in the green leaves.

In Kashmir the propagation of Chinar tree is done through cuttings and rooted suckers in spring. Seeds are also used after stratification, but not commonly.

Economic Importance

Chinar, a multipurpose tree, is considered to be a wealth because it contributes not only to the beauty of Kashmir but also to its resources. Additionally, being a highly valued ornamental tree of Kashmir it is mostly grown for shade in parks and on the roadside as avenues. The wood of the Chinar is easy to saw and presents a decorative figure when quarter sawn. It can be finished to a smooth surface that takes a beautiful polish. In Kashmir, the wood is mostly used for small boxes, trays, cabinet making, furniture, veneers, carving and for wood pulp.

The bark possesses antiscorbutic and antirheumatic properties. Boiled in vinegar,

it is given in diarrhoea and dysentery. Bruised fresh leaves are applied in ophthalmia. A walk over fallen dry Chinar leaves makes a rustling musical sound until the dry leaves are gathered and burnt to make light charcoal for use in fire pots (Kangris) in hard winter days. In addition they are good sources of certain important chemical compounds like platanin, tannin, allantoin, phlobaphene, mannitol, platanolic acid and platanol, which can be extracted for novel use.

Cry of the Chinar

In spite of government restrictions in the past on the felling of Chinar trees in the valley, the tree population has been declining over the years suffering much damage due to neglect and human greed. This 'king of trees' has been under the axe of smugglers for long. Their number has dwindled to over half—from 42,000 in 1970 to less than 27,000 in the Valley. Once abundant, the Chinars are increasingly becoming a rare sight.

Visit any corner of the valley, including the protected Naseem Bagh on the shores of Dal Lake, and you get the impression that the gracious Chinar tree, which had

added to the picturesque beauty of Kashmir for centuries, seems to be close to extinction.

However, it is heartening to note that the government is making honest efforts to stop the illegal felling of this great tree of Kashmir and declared 15 March 2009 as The Chinar Plantation Day. A recent ban has been enforced to curb cutting of Chinar trees. Chinar trees are now being registered and are considered national property of the state. Increased awareness means most old Chinars are protected and looked after. Conscious efforts are being made to undertake plantation drives of this tree in other states as well. The tree has been successfully planted in New Delhi, Chandigarh, Dehradun and Meerut. But the size and girth attained in these places is no parallel to that of the tree in the Kashmir valley.

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Mature Fruit of Chinar