

Banni Pooja (Shami Vriksha Pooja) and its Significance for Mysore Dasara Festival

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ABSTRACT:

In this paper an attempt has been made to explain the worship of Shammi Tree (Banni Mara) on the Vijaya-Dasami day in Mysore. Vijayadashami is celebrated differently in different parts of India, but one noticeable thing in most of these celebrations is the importance given to certain plants. Banni tree or Shammi tree is very sacred to Hindus and comes into prominence during Dasara festival. Every Hindu warrior before going to war would offer prayers to Banni tree and then proceed. Banni tree holds a special place in the Mysore Dasara where it's worshipped on the Vijay-Dashami day. While every region has its own unique flavor and significance for the day, this is a piece discussing a ritualistic practice – Worship of Shammi Vruksha (Banni Tree) and giving Shammi Patra (Banni ele in Kannada) to others. Not only this, there are so many things were discussed in this paper.

KEYWORDS:

Mysore Dasara, Vijayadashami, Shammi Tree, Banni Mara, Bannimantap Ground, Durga Pooja.

India is a country where everything in the creation is revered – both living and non-living. After the holy nine nights, the Navaratri, Vijayadashami is a day to Celebrate Victory of Good over Evil. While every region has its own unique flavor and significance for the day, this is a piece discussing a ritualistic practice – Worship of Shammi Vruksha (Banni Tree) and giving Shammi Patra (Banni ele in Kannada) to others.

It is botanically the Prosopis Spicegrem of Linnaeus; the Memosa (Acacia) Suma of Roxburgh. It is also known by the alternative names of Jambi and Banhi of Banni. Hence the name Banhi (or Vahni, fire) given to it. It is also known as the Saktiphali or Saktiphala, the tree which contains or grants Sakti, i.e., the tree whose worship imparts power to the devotee. Banni is a Kannada word for the Sanskrit word Shami.

Shami is thus identified with Sakti, the chief attribute of Durga and hence her worship of nine days ends appropriately with the attribute of her most important attribute. The dedication of certain trees to deities is well known in India. The following table shows a few of these:

Sl. No	Tree or Plant	Deity dedicated to	Day and Month for worship
1	Aswatha	Trimurtis	Monday on which the Amavasya falls
2	Tulishi	Lakshmi	Karthika Suddha Pournima and Karthika Suddha Dwadasi
3	Arka (Ekke)	Surya	Rathasapthami (Magha Suddha Saptami)
4	Vi-hnukranti	Vishnu	Rishipanchami
5	Ala and Atti	Saraswathi	Anantachaturdasi (Bhadrapada Suddha Chaturdasi)
6	Nelli or Amal-aka	Dhatri (Earth)	Karthika Suddha Pournima
7	Garika	Ganesha	Bhadrapada Suddha Chauti
8	Sami	Durga	Vijayadasami

Likewise, the Navagrahas or the nine planets have each a plant dedicated to them and their products are associated with their pujas.

This tree is very sacred to Hindus and comes into prominence during Dasara festival. In Karnataka (and many other places too), Banni mara is believed to be the tree where the Pandavas hid their weapons during exile and revered and worshipped on Vijay-Dashami day. Banni mara or the Shammi Vruksha holds a special place in the Mysore Dasara where it's worshipped on the Vijay-Dashami day.

Dasara or Vijayadashami is the 10th and the most auspicious day of the festival celebrated across the country by one and all irrespective of the caste and creed. According to legends, it was on this day Goddess Chamundeshwari (also known as Durga or Kali in Bengal and several other parts of India) killed the buffalo headed demon Mahishasur. The battle between the two took place on a hill near Mysore which later came to be known as Chamundi Hill. The temple atop this hill is very famous. On the ninth day viz. Maha Navami, a ritual known as Aayudha Pooja is performed, where we find people performing Pooja to their vehicles, instruments, machinery, tools and implements, weapons, even household tools, computers etc. Transport operators perform pooja to their vehicles on this day and take their vehicles for circumambulation around the Shami tree.

Tradition of Mysore Dasara: The tradition of the festival is traced to the Vijayanagara Empire (1336 A.D. to 1565 A.D.), when it became a Naada Habba (or people's festival). The Wodeyars of Mysore continued the Dasara Festival, initially by Raja Wodeyar I (1578-1617 CE) in the year 1610 at Srirangapatna. Mysuru Dussehra is the "Nadahabba" of the State-Festival of Karnataka. It is also called Navaratri. Nava-Ratri means nine-nights. 10-day called as Durga pooja It is a 10-day festival with the last day being Vijayadashami, the most auspicious day of Dussehra. Dussehra usually falls in the month of September or October. According to a legend, Vijayadashami denotes the victory of truth over evil and was the day when the Hindu Goddess Chamundeshwari killed the demon Mahishasura. Mahishasura is the demon whose slaying by the Goddess gave the name Mysuru.

The grandest and the most important day of the Mysore Dasara celebrations is, of course, Vijayadashami. Mysore Palace begins its day with a

puja. Also known as the Nandi Dhawaja Puja or the puja of Nandi, Shiva's vehicle, it begins at noon. After the Dwaja Puja is over begins the traditional Dusara procession held on the streets of Mysore city. Elephant procession will be held during Mysore Dasara is called Jumbu Savari. The original name to this procession is Jumbi Savari ("going to the Shami (Banni) tree"). Now Goddess Chamundeshwari idol is taken in procession on a well-decorated elephant and ends at Bannimantap Ground.

The Dasara procession would reach Bannimantap, and the Maharaja would perform pooja/prayer to Banni tree and carry a branch of this tree back to his palace. Maharajas worshipped weapons and the state sword was sent in a procession of horses, elephants and troops to the Banni tree, where Maharajas hunted wild animals that were specially captured and released for the purpose, reviewed army units and witnessed display of fireworks. Then kings worshipped Banni tree while priests invoked blessings of Banni Mahakali, the goddess of the tree. Also, a prayer to the Goddess of Banni tree (Shami Stuti) was chanted. After offering pooja, Kings use to pluck leaves of Banni tree and keep it safely until the next Dasara. In Mysore, soldiers used to perform banni pooja seeking victory before going into war. The royals worship the Banni tree here which has its own history.

Historical legends of Shami tree: Shami Tree is considered one of the most pious trees in Hindu Mythology. According to Hindu scriptures, various rituals are performed to mark the triumph of Good over Evil. Shami Puja and Aprajita Puja are the most followed rituals performed during the Aparahna muhurta on Dussehra. Dussehra isn't just about burning the gigantic effigies of Demon King Ravana, his brother Kumbh Karana and son Meghanada. It is said that before marching into Lanka, Lord Rama had prayed for his victory in front of the Shami Tree. Thereby, Shami Puja is held during the Aparahna muhurta on Dussehra. Since ages, Kshatriyas and Kings perform Shami Puja on this day and implore their Prosperity and Triumph over enemies.

The legend behind is rooted in the great epic Mahabharata. In the Mahabharata, the Pandavas are known to have spent their thirteenth year of exile in disguise in the kingdom of Virata. Before going to Virata, identified

by some with modern Barer, they are known to have hung their celestial weapons in this tree for safe keeping for a year. After completing his van-vas (exile period) of 13 years including one year of Agyatavas (living incognito) before embarking on the war path against the Kauravas he retrieved his weapons.

When they returned after a year, they found their weapons safe in branches of the Shami tree. Before taking the weapons, they worshipped the tree and thanked it for keeping their weapons safe. They worshiped the tree and asked for power and victory in the ensuing battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas. Pandavas won the battle and hence it is believed that the Banni tree power and victory to those who pray to it. They offered prayers to the Shami tree as well as Goddess Durga, the presiding Goddess of strength and victory. The Pandavas fought valiantly in the battle and emerged victorious thus commemorating Vijaydashami. 'Shamee' or 'Banni' was the Kula Devata for Pandavas and even Srinivasa also told that it is their Kula deva.

*Shami shamayate papam shami shatruvinaashini
Arjunasya dhanurdhaari raamasya priyavaadini*

**Shami the remover of all sins, the destroyer of all enemies bore
witness
to Arjuna taking his bow and Lord Rama coming back to his near
and dear.**

There is a story about Guru Dakshine & Shamee Tree: An young brahmin named Kautsa in Ayodhya, during Tetrayuga, once after completing education from Guru asked his Guru to accept a Guru Dakshina – a present offered by students to Guru named Varatantu, after completing their studies. Guru Sri Varatantu at first said he did not want any Dakshina. But young Kautsa insisted that he should take a Dakshina. Guru Varatantu to get rid of Kautsa asked him for 14 crore (140 million) gold coins. One crore for each subject taught.

The student then went to Sri Ramachandra who was ruling Ayodhya and asked for the gold coins needed to pay his Guru Dakshina. Sri Ramachandra promised to help Kautsa and asked him to wait near the Shamee

(Shamee Tree is favorite for Ramachandra). In three days, time, Sri Ramachandra with the help of Lord Kuber, the God wealth, showered gold coins from the leaves of Shamee Tree. The leaves of the trees became gold coins. Kautsa collected the coins and gave 14 crore gold coins to Guru Sri Varatantu. The rest of coins were distributed to the needy by Kautsa. This happened on a Dussehra day. To commemorate this event even today people, collect leaves of Shamee tree and present it as gold.

Shami exchange: There is a custom on Vijayadashami Day to do the pooja for Shamee Tree. People also exchange Shami leaves or branches among other friends and elders with the shloka Shamee shamayate paapam and wish each other victory in their own ventures and efforts. This custom is followed in North Karnataka and Maharashtra. Following an age-old tradition, people exchange the Banni leaves or branches with each other saying “Lets exchange Banni for gold” or “Lets exchange gold for Banni”.

We say “Banni Bangaaravaagana” while handing over leaves – which has two meanings. Literally it means – Come, let us become Gold – but symbolically it means, let us be like the Banni/Shami Gold relation.

Shanitraṣṭu, Pushitraṣṭu, Thushtiraṣṭu.

May you be blessed with Peace, Prosperity and Contentment.

Shami tree is worshipped with a śtotram on Dasara day to get ‘Vijay’ (success) in all fields of life. The practice of giving Shami Patri or Banni ele, (leaves) on Vijayadashami to symbolize a gift equivalent to gold but filled with love.

All of India celebrates Dussehra or Vijayadashami with grand fervor, with different names and traditions. The festival is celebrated with a pomp and extravagance in Mysore, that the royal town has become synonymous with the 10-day festival, which celebrates and commemorates the victory of the Goddess Chamundeshwari over the demon Mahishasura and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. When Mysore was still a princely state, celebrations on this day included a grand procession of the Maharaja (King) of Mysore in a Golden Ambari (elephant mounted throne) to Banni Mantap (a playground) where he would symbolically cut a fully grown shami tree. This practice is in vogue even today. The same tradition was

followed by Vijayanagar kings and then by Maharajas of Mysore till Karnataka government took over the festivities in early 1970s. At Present Karnataka state worshipping Shami tree not for personal gains but for the welfare of the society.

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The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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