



Healing dharma and sacred ecology: Study of herbs and shrubs in the Ramayana and Mahabharata and their epical, narrative and ethnobotanical significance

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66856/ijmrd.2026.13.3.13382>

Abstract

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the two foundational Sanskrit epics of Indian civilization, contain a remarkable corpus of botanical knowledge woven into their narrative. These epics are repositories of cultural memory, philosophical wisdom, ecological consciousness and traditional medical knowledge. Not only are these epics of religious and literary importance, but they are also rich in references to herbs, shrubs, sacred trees and medicinal plants that played an essential part in healing, ritual, war, ascetic life and spiritual transformation. The present study deals with the herbs and shrubs mentioned in these epics in relation to their narrative settings, their Ayurvedic properties, their botanical identities and their symbolic importance. Iconic medicinal plants like Sanjeevani, Vishalyakarani, Sandhanakarani, Soma, Brahmi, Jatamansi, Nagakesara and Triphala are given special consideration. The study shows that these plants are not simply botanical references, but active narrative agents that affect the unfolding of events and represent deeper philosophical ideas, such as healing, immortality, wisdom, sacrifice and ecological harmony. Through a synthesis of literary analysis, ethnobotany, Ayurveda, and environmental humanities, this paper argues that the epics display an advanced ecological worldview that connects nature to dharma, health, and spiritual evolution. The study underscores the continued relevance of epic botanical knowledge in present-day debates on traditional medicine, biodiversity conservation and sustainable living. Combining literary analysis with ethnobotanical and medical perspectives, the paper shows that plants are active agents in the epic imagination and an important dimension of India's intellectual and ecological heritage.

Keywords: Ramayana, Mahabharata, Ayurveda, Ethnobotany, Medicinal Plants, Sanjeevani, Soma, Brahmi, Sacred Ecology, Narrative Symbolism, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Indian Epics, herbal medicine, Environmental Humanities

Introduction

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata occupy a unique place in the cultural and intellectual history of South Asia. These epics are venerated as the repositories of dharma, ethics, kingship, spirituality and social philosophy. However, they also carry valuable insights into ancient ecological consciousness and traditional botanical knowledge. Their narratives are rich in references to forests, sacred groves, medicinal herbs, ritual grasses, flowering trees and healing shrubs, indicating an intimate relationship of human life with the natural world.

Herbs and shrubs are not mere elements of scenery in these epics. But they are catalysts of transformation, agents of healing, instruments of divine intervention and symbols of spiritual wisdom. The epic tale of Hanuman lifting the Dronagiri mountain in search of the life-saving Sanjeevani herb is an illustration of how medicinal plants become decisive forces in the fight between life and death. Similarly, the ritual significance of Soma, Brahmi, Jatamansi, Triphala and other medicinal plants indicates the centrality of plants in sacrificial traditions, kingship, physical health, mental discipline, ritual purity and divine-human interaction.

The medicinal biodiversity of Chitrakuta, Dandakaranya, Kamyaka and Himalayan forests, inhabited by learned sages with deep knowledge of healing herbs, is described as living repositories of medicinal biodiversity. These landscapes are sacred ecological spaces where sages gain knowledge, warriors receive healing, and spiritual seekers find

enlightenment. In these depictions, the epics promote a holistic vision in which the well-being of humanity is inherently linked with ecological equilibrium.

The present study aims to explore the herbs and shrubs mentioned in Ramayana and Mahabharata by investigating their botanical identity, Ayurvedic properties, narrative function and symbolic value. The study seeks to show, through an interdisciplinary lens combining literary criticism, ethnobotany, Ayurveda, and environmental studies, that epic flora is an important but understudied part of ancient Indian knowledge systems and the way these plants figure significantly in the epical imagination and cultural memory of ancient India.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify major herbs and shrubs mentioned in the Ramayana and Mahabharata and examine their botanical identifications and medicinal properties.
2. To examine their narrative and symbolic significance.
3. To investigate their Ayurvedic and medicinal properties.
4. To correlate traditional descriptions with modern botanical identifications.
5. To explore the ecological consciousness embedded in the epics through plant imagery.
6. To analyse how plants function as symbolic and transformative narrative devices.
7. Explore their role in warfare, ritual asceticism and healing.

8. Assess the continuity between epic botanical knowledge and ayurvedic traditions.

Methodology

The study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology involving:

- Textual analysis of the *Valmiki Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.
- Comparative examination of Ayurvedic literature.
- Botanical correlation with contemporary ethnobotanical research.
- Narrative and symbolic interpretation of plant references.
- Environmental humanities approach to sacred ecology

Major Herbs and Shrubs in the Ramayana and Mahabharata

Botanical Identification, Medicinal Properties, and Epic Context

1. Sanjeevani

Sanskrit Name: Mṛtasanjeevanī

Botanical Identity: *Selaginella bryopteris*, a desiccation-tolerant lycophyte belonging to the family *Selaginellaceae*. The botanical identification is traditionally proposed and remains a subject of discussion.

Epic Context: Sanjeevani is described as the herb that revives Lakshmana during the Lanka war.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally associated with antioxidant, adaptogenic, revitalizing, and restorative properties.

Narrative Significance: Sanjeevani is a legendary life-restoring herb symbolizing healing, resilience, hope, and the triumph of life over death.

2. Vishalyakarani

Sanskrit Name: Viśalyākarani

Botanical Identity: *Taxus wallichiana* Zucc. (Himalayan yew), family *Taxaceae*. The exact botanical identity remains uncertain.

Epic Context: Vishalyakarani is believed to remove arrows and other embedded weapons from wounded warriors.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally associated with coagulant, antiseptic, wound-healing, anti-inflammatory, analgesic, and restorative properties.

Narrative Significance: The legendary herb is believed to remove embedded weapons and heal grievous injuries, symbolizing recovery, protection, and the restoration of physical integrity.

3. Sandhanakarani

Sanskrit Name: Sandhānakaraṇī

Botanical Identity: *Cissus quadrangularis* L. (Hadjod or Veldt Grape), family *Vitaceae*. Its identification is based on traditional interpretations.

Epic Context: Sandhanakarani is believed to repair tissues and heal fractures.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is renowned for its bone-healing, anti-inflammatory, analgesic, tissue-regenerating, and restorative properties.

Narrative Significance: The legendary herb is believed to unite fractured bones and repair damaged tissues, symbolizing restoration, resilience, and the regeneration of life and strength.

4. Suvarnakarani

Sanskrit Name: Suvarṇakaraṇī

Botanical Identity: *Curcuma longa* L. (Turmeric), family *Zingiberaceae*. Its exact correspondence with the legendary herb remains uncertain.

Epic Context: Suvarnakarani is believed to restore complexion and vitality.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally valued for tissue rejuvenation and for its wound-healing, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antimicrobial, and rejuvenating properties.

Narrative Significance: The legendary herb is believed to restore complexion, vitality, and bodily vigor after injury, symbolizing renewal, recovery, and the return of health and radiance.

5. Brahmi

Sanskrit Name: Brāhmī

Botanical Identity: *Bacopa monnieri*, family *Plantaginaceae* (formerly *Scrophulariaceae*).

Epic Context: Brahmi is associated with medicinal use in forest hermitages.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally valued for its memory-enhancing, neuroprotective, anxiolytic, antioxidant, and cognitive-supportive properties.

Narrative Significance: Brahmi is associated with wisdom, learning, mental clarity, and the cultivation of higher consciousness, reflecting its connection with Brahma, the deity of knowledge and creation.

6. Katuka

Sanskrit Name: Kaṭuka

Botanical Identity: *Picrorhiza kurroo* (Kutki), family *Plantaginaceae*.

Epic Context: Katuka is associated with medicinal use in forests.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally valued for its hepatoprotective, antipyretic, immunomodulatory, digestive, and detoxifying properties.

Narrative Significance: Katuka is regarded as a potent cleansing and rejuvenating herb, symbolizing purification, restoration of health, and the balance of bodily humors (*doshas*).

7. Ativisha

Sanskrit Name: Ātiviṣā

Botanical Identity: *Aconitum heterophyllum* (Atis), family *Ranunculaceae*.

Epic Context: Ativisha is associated with ascetic medicinal practices.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally associated with antipyretic, digestive, anti-diarrheal, anti-inflammatory, and pediatric therapeutic properties.

Narrative Significance: Ativisha is regarded as a life-preserving herb used traditionally to combat fever, poisoning, and childhood ailments, symbolizing healing, protection, and vitality.

8. Kusha Grass

Sanskrit Name: Kuśa

Botanical Identity: *Desmostachya bipinnata*, family *Poaceae*.

Epic Context: Kusha grass is prominently associated with rituals and yajñas.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is a perennial sacred grass traditionally valued for its cooling, diuretic, antimicrobial, wound-healing, and purifying properties.

Narrative Significance: Its use in yajñas, meditation, and sacred ceremonies symbolizes purity, spiritual discipline, protection, and divine sanctity.

9. Durva Grass

Sanskrit Name: Dūrvā

Botanical Identity: *Cynodon dactylon*, family *Poaceae*.

Epic Context: Durva grass is widely associated with religious ceremonies.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is a perennial creeping grass valued in Ayurveda for its cooling, hemostatic, anti-inflammatory, wound-healing, antimicrobial, and diuretic properties.

Narrative Significance: Durva symbolizes longevity and auspiciousness. Its sacred association with Ganesha, to whom it is especially offered in worship, represents longevity, prosperity, purity, resilience, and divine blessings.

10. Soma

Sanskrit Name: Soma

Botanical Identity: *Ephedra gerardiana*. The exact botanical identity of the ancient Soma plant remains debated.

Epic Context: Soma was associated with Vedic sacrifices and royal rituals.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: Soma is traditionally associated with stimulant, sacramental, and rejuvenative properties.

Narrative Significance: Soma represents divine inspiration, immortality, spiritual exaltation, and communication with the gods.

11. Asoka

Sanskrit Name: Asoka

Botanical Identity: *Saraca asoca*, family *Fabaceae*.

Epic Context: Asoka is associated with Sita's captivity in the Asoka Vatika.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: The plant is renowned in Ayurveda, particularly for its traditional applications in women's health.

Narrative Significance: Asoka symbolizes hope, resilience, purity, and the triumph of virtue over adversity.

12. Asvattha

Sanskrit Name: Asvattha

Botanical Identity: *Ficus religiosa*, family *Moraceae*.

Epic Context: Asvattha is associated with sacred hermitages and philosophical discourse.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally associated with antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, wound-healing, antidiabetic, and antimicrobial properties.

Narrative Significance: The Asvattha symbolizes cosmic existence, spiritual wisdom, immortality, and the interconnectedness of all life.

13. Arjuna

Sanskrit Name: Arjuna

Botanical Identity: *Terminalia arjuna*, family *Combretaceae*.

Epic Context: Arjuna is associated with cardio-protective and wound-healing traditions.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally valued for its antioxidant, antihypertensive, and anti-inflammatory properties.

Narrative Significance: The plant is associated with strength, courage, and righteousness, sharing its name with Arjuna, the heroic warrior of the Mahabharata.

14. Guduci (Giloy)

Sanskrit Name: Guduci

Botanical Identity: *Tinospora cordifolia*, family *Menispermaceae*.

Epic Context: Guduci is regarded as a general restorative herb.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally associated with immunomodulatory, antipyretic, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, hepatoprotective, and rejuvenative properties.

Narrative Significance: Guduci is popularly associated with "Amrita," the nectar of immortality, symbolizing vitality, longevity, disease resistance, and the restoration of physical and spiritual well-being.

15. Apamarga

Sanskrit Name: Apamarga

Botanical Identity: *Achyranthes aspera*, family *Amaranthaceae*.

Epic Context: Apamarga is associated with ritual purification and battlefield wound treatment.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally associated with anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, digestive, diuretic, wound-healing, and detoxifying properties.

Narrative Significance: Its use in purification rites and protective rituals symbolizes the removal of obstacles, cleansing of impurities, and restoration of physical and spiritual balance.

16. Kusa (Kusha Grass)

Sanskrit Name: Kusa

Botanical Identity: *Desmostachya bipinnata*, family *Poaceae*.

Epic Context: Kusa is associated with sacrificial rites and ascetic practices.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally associated with cooling, diuretic, antimicrobial, wound-healing, and purificatory properties.

Narrative Significance: Kusa is indispensable in yajñas, ancestral rites, meditation, and sacred ceremonies, symbolizing purity, spiritual discipline, divine protection, and ritual sanctity.

17. Haritaki

Sanskrit Name: Haritaki

Botanical Identity: *Terminalia chebula*, family *Combretaceae*.

Epic Context: Haritaki is associated with ascetic and household medicine.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally valued for its digestive, laxative, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, rejuvenating, and detoxifying properties.

Narrative Significance: Haritaki has a revered status as the "King of Medicines" and is a key component of the classical formulation *Triphala*. It symbolizes longevity, purification, holistic healing, and the maintenance of physical and spiritual well-being.

18. Shatavari

Sanskrit Name: Satavari

Botanical Identity: *Asparagus racemosus*, family *Asparagaceae*.

Epic Context: Shatavari is associated with domestic and royal healthcare.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally associated with adaptogenic, rejuvenative, galactagogue, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and female reproductive health-supporting properties.

Narrative Significance: Shatavari is regarded as a foremost *rasayana* for women, symbolizing fertility, nourishment, vitality, motherhood, and longevity.

19. Neem

Sanskrit Name: Nima / Nimba

Botanical Identity: *Azadirachta indica*, family *Meliaceae*.

Epic Context: Neem is associated with hygiene, preventive medicine, and ritual and medicinal cleansing.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally valued for its antimicrobial, antifungal, anti-inflammatory, antipyretic, blood-purifying, and immunomodulatory properties.

Narrative Significance: Neem is associated with health, protection, purification, and disease prevention, symbolizing resilience, healing, and the safeguarding of physical and spiritual well-being.

20. Guggulu

Sanskrit Name: Guggulu

Botanical Identity: *Commiphora wightii*, family *Burseraceae*.

Epic Context: Guggulu is associated with recovery from combat injuries.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally associated with anti-inflammatory, lipid-lowering, antioxidant, detoxifying, wound-healing, and rejuvenative properties.

Narrative Significance: Guggulu has sacred use as an aromatic resin in yajñas, purification rituals, and healing formulations. It symbolizes cleansing, protection, spiritual elevation, and the restoration of balance and well-being.

21. Jatamansi

Sanskrit Name: Jatamamsi

Botanical Identity: *Nardostachys jatamansi*, family *Caprifoliaceae* (formerly *Valerianaceae*).

Epic Context: Jatamansi is associated with ascetic and medicinal use.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally valued for its neuroprotective, calming, adaptogenic, antioxidant, anxiolytic, and cognitive-supportive properties.

Narrative Significance: Jatamansi symbolizes mental tranquility, spiritual discipline, and higher consciousness, representing inner peace, wisdom, and the harmonization of mind and spirit.

22. Nagakesara

Sanskrit Name: Nagakesara

Botanical Identity: *Mesua ferrea*, family *Calophyllaceae* (formerly *Clusiaceae*).

Epic Context: Nagakesara is associated with battlefield healing.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally valued for its haemostatic, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antimicrobial, digestive, and wound-healing properties.

Narrative Significance: Nagakesara symbolizes purity, auspiciousness, prosperity, and sacred worship. Its fragrant flowers are frequently used in religious rituals and offerings, representing spiritual refinement and divine grace.

23. Triphala – Haritaki

Sanskrit Name: Haritaki

Botanical Identity: *Terminalia chebula*, family *Combretaceae*.

Epic Context: Haritaki as a component of Triphala is associated with daily health maintenance.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally valued for its digestive, laxative, antioxidant, rejuvenative, and detoxifying properties.

Narrative Significance: Haritaki has the revered status of the “King of Medicines” and symbolizes longevity, purification, and holistic healing in Ayurvedic traditions.

24. Triphala – Amalaki

Botanical Identity: *Phyllanthus emblica*, family *Phyllanthaceae*.

Epic Context: Amalaki as a component of Triphala is associated with daily health maintenance.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally associated with antioxidant, immunomodulatory, digestive, rejuvenative, and anti-aging properties.

Narrative Significance: Amalaki is associated with vitality, longevity, and divine nourishment, symbolizing health, prosperity, and spiritual purity.

25. Triphala – Bibhitaki

Botanical Identity: *Terminalia bellirica*, family *Combretaceae*.

Epic Context: Bibhitaki as a component of Triphala is associated with daily health maintenance.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally associated with expectorant, digestive, antimicrobial, detoxifying, and rejuvenative properties.

Narrative Significance: Bibhitaki is an important component of *Triphala*, symbolizing fearlessness, purification, balance, and the maintenance of holistic well-being.

26. Tulasi (Holy Basil)

Sanskrit Name: Tulasi

Botanical Identity: *Ocimum tenuiflorum*, family *Lamiaceae*.

Epic Context: Tulasi is strongly associated with devotional practices.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally valued for its adaptogenic, immunomodulatory, antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and respiratory-supportive properties.

Narrative Significance: Tulasi has a sacred association with Vishnu and Lakshmi. It symbolizes purity, devotion, protection, spiritual well-being, and divine grace.

27. Yava (Barley)

Sanskrit Name: Yava

Botanical Identity: *Hordeum vulgare*, family *Poaceae*.

Epic Context: Yava is associated with yajñas and offerings.

Ayurvedic/Medicinal Properties: It is traditionally valued for its nutritive, digestive, diuretic, hypolipidemic, and strength-promoting properties.

Narrative Significance: Barley has an important role as a sacred grain used in yajñas, rituals, and offerings. It

symbolizes prosperity, sustenance, fertility, abundance, and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

Narrative Functions of Plants in the Epics

Table 1: Narrative Roles of Herbs and Shrubs

Narrative Function	Representative Plants	Literary Significance
Heroic Rescue	Sanjivani	Enables restoration of life and continuation of the plot
Ritual Legitimization	Soma, Kusa	Sanctifies kingship and sacrificial authority
Emotional Symbolism	Asoka	Externalizes grief, longing, and resilience
Battlefield Medicine	Apamarga, Guggulu, Arjuna	Demonstrates practical medical knowledge
Ascetic Sustenance	Haritaki, Guduci	Supports spiritual discipline and longevity
Sacred Geography	Asvattha, Padma	Marks holy spaces and divine presence

Comparative Analysis of Epic Botanical Knowledge

Table 2: Comparative Functions of Herbs in Both Epics

Function	Ramayana	Mahabharata
Battlefield Healing	Central theme through Sanjeevani and related herbs	Present through medicinal discussions and healing traditions
Ritual Use	Kusha, Durva, Soma	Soma, Yava, Tulsi, Kusha
Ascetic Practices	Forest sages use medicinal flora	Hermitages extensively associated with herbs
Symbolism	Hope, resurrection, devotion	Wisdom, discipline, immortality
Ecological Awareness	Forests as healing ecosystems	Forests as centres of learning and spirituality
Divine Intervention	Strongly emphasized	Integrated with ritual and philosophical discourse

Epical and Narrative Significance of Herbs and Shrubs

1. Herbs as Narrative Catalysts in Indian Knowledge Traditions

In the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), herbs are not merely medicinal plants, but turn into powerful narrative elements, which influence the flow of events in epics, Puranas, Vedic texts and classical Sanskrit literature. They are the symbolic bridges between the human and the cosmic, celebrated as agents of healing, wisdom, immortality and divine energy. Herbs are transformative agents in stories such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata that affect the development of characters, the progression of the plot, and the resolution of key conflicts. Moreover, they represent profound philosophical ideas since they mediate between life and death, health and disease, ignorance and knowledge, mortality and immortality. These sacred plants, with their practical usefulness and symbolic depth, enrich narrative structures, preserve cultural memory and reflect the holistic worldview that is at the heart of Indian civilization.

Herbs as Catalysts of Plot Development

Herbs are powerful plot drivers in Indian epics that change the course of events and guaranty the continuation of heroic missions. The most important example is Sanjeevani, whose search in the Ramayana is a crucial turning point when Hanuman brings it back to revive the injured Lakshmana, thus ensuring the success of Rama’s task and the victory of dharma. Similarly, *Vishalyakarani*, *Sandhanakarani* and *Suvarnakarani* act as life-restoring and healing agents which enable recuperation, renewal and the persistence of epic action. These sacred herbs are proof that botanical knowledge is not only medicinal but also a vital narrative force in the resolution of crises, the aiding of heroes, and the quickening of the epic storyline.

Herbs as Symbols of Life, Renewal, and Immortality

In Indian traditions, herbs represent the victory of life over death, spiritual regeneration and the cyclical regeneration of life that is central to Indian cosmology. The Vedic Soma, a divine plant, is a powerful symbol of vitality, inspiration, immortality and communion with the gods, a powerful symbol of transcendence and spiritual awakening. Likewise, Guduci (Amrita) is known as the “nectar of immortality” and is revered for its divine origin and life-restoring powers. In sum, these sacred herbs are more than a remedy; they are a symbol of eternal life and regeneration and of the deep Indian philosophy of achieving wellness through the harmonious interplay of nature, body, mind and spirit.

Herbs as Instruments of Divine Intervention

Herbs are instruments of divine intervention in Indian epical and religious narratives. They are sacred channels through which divine grace, protection and spiritual power manifest in the human world. Kusha grass and Durva grass are sacred to Vedic rituals. Tulasi is considered to be the most beloved plant of Vishnu and Lakshmi. It is a symbol of purity, devotion and divine blessings. These herbs are not only their physicality as they are powerful mediators between the earthly and transcendental worlds with their ritual, symbolic, and spiritual importance. They emphasize the close relationship between humans and the sacred cosmos.

Herbs as Symbols of Moral and Spiritual Values

In Indian narratives herbs and sacred plants are profound symbols of moral, philosophical and spiritual values, embodying ideals that guide human life and consciousness. The Asvattha (*Ficus religiosa*) is a potent symbol of the divine-rooted universe, as illustrated in the Bhagavad Gita, representing eternal life, cosmic unity and spiritual emancipation. Brahmi (*Bacopa monnieri*) embodies wisdom, learning, intellectual growth, higher consciousness,

and represents the transformative pursuit of knowledge. Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) is a symbol of purification, protection, resilience and healing, the triumph of order and well-being over disease and disorder. All in all, these plants go beyond their medicinal roles and turn into eternal narrative symbols of wisdom, spiritual enlightenment, ethical existence and harmonious interaction between humanity and cosmos.

Herbs as Markers of Cultural and Ritual Identity

In Indian traditions, herbs and sacred plants are potent symbols of cultural and ritual identity, preserving collective memory and reinforcing enduring social values across generations. Kusha and Durva grasses were used in Vedic sacrifices, ancestral rites and religious ceremonies. They symbolize purity, discipline, continuity and sacred duty. Yava (Barley) is at the center of ritual offerings as a symbol of prosperity, fertility, agricultural abundance and societal sustenance. Their ongoing presence in sacred stories and rituals not only lends cultural authenticity to the stories but also acts as living repositories of tradition, ensuring the transfer of spiritual, ethical and cultural heritage through time.

Herbs as Agents of Healing and Restoration

In Indian narratives herbs are agents of healing and restoration, restoring physical, mental, social and cosmic harmony. The three constituents of Triphala, haritaki, Amalaki and Bibhitaki symbolize balance, longevity, holistic health and the harmonious integration of body, mind and environment. Shatavari represents nourishment, fertility, motherhood, regeneration and continuity of life, emphasizing themes of nurture and sustenance. Jatamansi is calming and restorative and represents mental balance, spiritual introspection and inner transformation, often associated with meditation and ascetic practice. These healing herbs, collectively, go beyond their therapeutic roles to become powerful narrative symbols of renewal, resilience, balance and the restoration of order in human existence and the broader cosmos.

Herbs as Ecological Narratives

Indian epics treat herbs as integral to ecological narratives, transforming forests into living repositories of wisdom, healing and spiritual strength. Dandakaranya, Chitrakuta, Naimisharanya and the Himalayan regions are sacred landscapes where the sages gain enlightenment, heroes undergo a radical change and the medicinal plants reveal their hidden virtues. Nature in these stories is not merely a stage but an active and sacred partner, reflecting the Indian Knowledge System's ecological ethos of conservation, coexistence, environmental harmony and respect for biodiversity.

Philosophical Dimensions of Herbal Narratives

Herbal narratives in Indian traditions carry philosophical dimensions that go far beyond their medicinal importance and are viewed as profound symbols of the fundamental truths of existence. They are symbols of the union of man and nature, of the inseparability of physical and spiritual well-being, of the power of knowledge, of the restoration of balance and harmony, and of the cycle of life, death and rebirth. Herbs are potent literary expressions of fundamental Indian philosophical concepts such as Dharma (righteous

order), Rta (cosmic order), Prakriti (nature) and Moksha (liberation) owing to their profound symbolic meanings. They elucidate the holistic worldview of the Indian Knowledge System and its understanding of life, consciousness and the cosmos.

In Indian epical and narrative traditions, herbs go beyond their medicinal properties and serve as potent narrative agents that propel the direction of events, enable transformation, permit divine intervention, exemplify healing and immortality, symbolize moral and spiritual values, and uphold cultural memory. These plants, from the life-reviving Sanjeevani of the Ramayana and the deathless Soma of the Vedas to the holy Tulasi of devotional traditions and the ritual Kusha of Vedic ceremonies, occupy a space that is a meeting point of literature, medicine, spirituality, ecology and philosophy. Their long survival is a testimony to the holistic perspective of the Indian Knowledge System. Here botanical knowledge is integrated in storytelling, where herbs are the active agents that influence the fate of humans and the cosmic order.

2. Herbs as Symbols of Life and Renewal

In the Indian Knowledge System, medicinal herbs are potent symbols of life, renewal and the perpetuity of life, representing nature's capacity to heal, regenerate and to maintain cosmic balance. The life-restoring power of Sanjeevani, the legendary herb of the Ramayana, symbolizes the victory of life over death, hope over despair, and renewal over destruction, as it revives Lakshmana and ensures the victory of dharma. Similarly, Triphala, a blend of Haritaki, Amalaki and Bibhitaki, represents lasting energy, longevity, general health and the harmony of body, mind and environment. These herbs are grounded in the Indian cosmological vision of creation, preservation, dissolution and regeneration, reflecting the cyclical nature of existence and the affirmation that decline and suffering are temporary stages within a larger process of transformation. Beyond their physical healing powers, they represent emotional resilience, spiritual growth, and cosmic balance, reflecting the idea that humans and nature are interconnected. Sanjeevani and Triphala make medicinal plants eternal symbols of hope, resilience and constant renewal as Indian narratives celebrate regeneration, longevity and life's everlasting victory over mortality.

3. Herbs as Instruments of Dharma

Medicinal plants are regarded as tools of Dharma in the Indian Knowledge System and therefore healing is not only a therapeutic activity but also a sacred obligation for the preservation of life, alleviation of suffering and maintenance of cosmic order. The use of herbs is shown as an expression of righteousness and compassion (Karuna) and non-violence (Ahimsa) in Indian epics, Puranas and Ayurveda, with the statement that protecting life is a basic moral responsibility. The ideal is vividly portrayed in the retrieval of Sanjeevani by Hanuman in Ramayana. This is an act of devotion, selfless service and the protection of dharma itself. Similarly, Vishalyakarani, Sandhanakarani and Suvarnakarani represent healing as a way for individuals to be able to meet their ethical and social responsibilities. Further supporting this view, Ayurveda considers medicinal plants such as Guduci, Haritaki, Amalaki, Bibhitaki and Shatavari as divine gifts which help in longevity, vitality and holistic well-being. Herbs not only have a healing

function but also reflect the symbiosis between man and nature, creating a sense of stewardship over the environment and respect for life. Medicinal plants are agents of physical, moral and cosmic restoration, embodying the Indian belief that healing is one of the highest expressions of dharma and a vital force in maintaining harmony within both society and the universe. This belief is deeply embedded in the Indian psyche.

4. Sacred Ecology and Environmental Consciousness

The Indian epics express a potent vision of sacred ecology and environmental consciousness. Nature is portrayed as an active, living actor in the cosmic order and not as a passive stage for human activity. In the Indian Knowledge System, forests, mountains, rivers, animals and medicinal plants are an interconnected web of existence where human, divine and natural realms co-exist in harmony. Sacred landscapes like Dandakaranya, Chitrakuta, Naimisharanya and the Himalayan forests are places of ecological richness, which is a prerequisite for physical survival and spiritual evolution. They are centers of wisdom, healing, spiritual transformation and biodiversity. This ecological ethos is exemplified in the Ramayana, in the search for the Sanjeevani, emphasizing the interdependence of humankind with biodiverse ecosystems for healing and regeneration. Medicinal plants such as Guduci, Tulasi, Neem, Brahmi, Shatavari and Haritaki are also regarded as sacred embodiments of nature's healing power, emphasizing the inextricability of environmental and human health. Based on Prakriti (nature), Rta (cosmic order) and Dharma (righteous duty), these stories promote ecological interdependence, conservation and sustainable management of natural resources. The epics promote an all-encompassing environmental ethic based on coexistence, humility, gratitude and reverence for biodiversity by depicting forests as sacred spaces and herbs as symbols of regeneration and equilibrium. They are basically the unity of physical well-being, spiritual fulfillment and ecological sustainability, and they give a timeless vision of harmony between man and nature.

5. Botanical Knowledge and Ancient Science

The Indian epics are not only literary and spiritual treasures but also remarkable storehouses of botanical knowledge and ancient scientific thought with sophisticated insights into medicinal plants, healing practices, ecology and natural systems. Their detailed references to herbs like Sanjeevani, Vishalyakarani, Sandhanakarani, Suvarnakarani, Guduci, Brahmi, Haritaki, Amalaki and Tulasi show a systematic knowledge of plant identification, therapeutic properties, habitat specificity and medicinal uses very similar to present day ethnobotany and pharmacognosy. These include episodes like the search for Sanjeevani in Ramayana, depicting an early knowledge of specialized plant-based treatments and pharmacological reasoning. The mentions of different forests and ecological zones indicate an advanced understanding of biodiversity and plant ecology. The epics conserved this empirical knowledge as narrative traditions that transmitted it to later generations and formed the basis of the systematic medical sciences of Ayurveda, particularly in its codified form in the Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita. This botanical tradition was grounded in observation, classification, experimentation and practical use, and combined scientific inquiry with ethical, ecological

and spiritual values, recognizing plants as living contributors to human health and cosmic harmony. The epics relate medicine, ecology, philosophy and spirituality to give a holistic view of health and sustainability and also to be permanent symbols of India's rich legacy of scientific knowledge, ecological wisdom and holistic health care.

6. Epical Significance of Selected Plants in Indian Knowledge Traditions

In Indian epics and sacred literature, plants are far more than elements of the natural world; they are powerful narrative, spiritual and philosophical symbols informing cultural understanding and communicating timeless truths about human existence. The Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedas, and related traditions present plants as symbols of healing, resilience, divine power, moral courage, and spiritual transformation, elevating them from simple botanical entities to powerful cultural metaphors. Of these, Sanjeevani, Soma, Asoka and Arjuna are of special significance. Each of these represents a different dimension of the Indian worldview. Sanjeevani is the symbol of resurrection and renewal, Soma of immortality and divine communion, Asoka of hope, resistance and endurance amidst suffering, and Arjuna of strength, courage and righteous action. The plants taken together are an embodiment of the confluence of nature, philosophy and spirituality in Indian literature. Botanical motifs emerge as timeless symbols of life, duty, resilience, transcendence and the human search for harmony with the cosmic order.

Sanjeevani – The Herb of Resurrection

Sanjeevani, identified with *Selaginella bryopteris*, is a unique and revered herb in the Indian epic literature, being the legendary Herb of Resurrection. Its importance is highlighted in the Ramayana during the crucial battle between Rama and Ravana, when Lakshmana is mortally wounded, threatening not only the mission of Rama, but also the victory of dharma. The powerful symbolic role of Sanjeevani as divine intervention, healing, and regeneration is revealed through the heroic adventure of Hanuman to the Himalayan mountain of Dronagiri to obtain the life-restoring herb, ultimately carrying the entire mountain when he could not identify it. Sanjeevani has a medicinal role and it also symbolizes victory of life over death, hope over despair, and order over chaos. It is a symbol of the healing power of nature, unwavering devotion and selfless service. Sanjeevani is an essential narrative device that enables the epic to proceed and dharma to ultimately triumph over adharma. In Indian tradition, Sanjeevani remains one of the most enduring cultural symbols of renewal, resilience, and the restorative powers of life.

Soma – The Plant of Divine Communion

Soma is the legendary Plant of Divine Communion and holds a central and sacred place in the Vedic tradition. It is usually identified with *Ephedra gerardiana* but its exact botanical identity is unknown. Soma, widely celebrated in the Rigveda, is revered as a sacred plant and as the divine ritual drink made from it, believed to grant vitality, strength, wisdom, inspiration, and immortality. Soma is more than a medicinal herb, it is a doorway to the divine world, a means of communion with the gods, a transcending of human experience to a higher state of consciousness. It works at the same time on the physical and the spiritual levels,

nourishing the body and at the same time fostering mystical insight and spiritual awakening. Soma, therefore, is a powerful symbol of the quest of humanity for higher knowledge, divine inspiration, spiritual enlightenment, transcendence and a union of the human with the sacred, symbolizing immortality (Amritatva) and cosmic understanding.

Asoka – The Tree of Sorrow and Resistance

Asoka (*Saraca asoca*) The Ramayana prominently mentions the Asoka tree, the sacred tree in Ashoka Vatika, the grove in Lanka where Sita was confined after being abducted by Ravana. In the midst of separation, suffering, temptation and uncertainty, Sita’s steadfast devotion, moral integrity and spiritual strength make the grove a powerful symbol of endurance and hope. The Asoka tree, the site of Hanuman’s first meeting with Sita, bears silent witness to her resilience and steadfast commitment to righteousness. The name “Asoka” is also significant, meaning “without sorrow,” and this is a poignant contrast to Sita’s trials and her unbroken faith in eventual justice. The Asoka tree is a symbol of resistance to oppression, hope in suffering, feminine resilience, moral integrity and triumph of virtue over adversity. It continues to be a powerful symbol of courage, dignity and spiritual perseverance in the face of injustice.

Arjuna – Botanical and Heroic Strength

Arjuna (*Terminalia arjuna*.) is a potent symbol of strength, resilience and righteous action in the Indian tradition. In Ayurveda, the tree is highly revered for its cardioprotective and strengthening properties and its durability, longevity and robust stature is synonymous with the qualities of courage, leadership and endurance. The association with

Arjuna, the heroic warrior of the Mahabharata, who represents courage, discipline, moral duty and the eternal struggle to preserve righteousness despite hardship, adds to its symbolic meaning. The lessons of the Bhagavad Gita are directed at Arjuna — a symbol of humanity’s struggle to do the right thing in the face of conflict and chaos. The Arjuna tree, as a symbol, stands for strength, endurance, fortitude in adversity, stability, protection and physical and spiritual resilience and thus, is a strong symbol of the harmonious integration of bodily strength, moral integrity and spiritual strength.

Sanjivani, Soma, Asoka and Arjuna are not just plants, they are also strong vessels of cultural and ethical meaning. Their deep entanglement in literature, spirituality and philosophy is a testimony to the profound integration of botany with the Indian Knowledge System. Sanjivani stands for resurrection, healing and renewal. Soma stands for divine communion, immortality and spiritual transcendence. Asoka stands for hope, resistance and unswerving moral endurance in the face of suffering. And Arjuna stands for strength, courage, resilience and righteous action. Collectively, these plants exemplify how Indian epics elevate facets of nature into timeless narrative symbols that impart profound lessons of life, healing, devotion, perseverance, spiritual awakening, and the human quest for harmony with the cosmic order, thus rendering them timeless symbols of India’s philosophical and cultural legacy.

Plants and Sacred Ecology

The epics portray forests as sacred ecological systems rather than untamed wilderness. Locations such as Citrakūṭa, Daṇḍakāranya, and Kāmyaka function as spaces of healing, learning, ethical transformation, and spiritual growth.

Table 3: Ecological Functions of Epic Landscapes

Epic Landscape	Associated Flora	Ecological Significance
Citrakūṭa	Brahmi, Guduci, medicinal herbs	Healing and contemplative environment
Daṇḍakāranya	Asoka, Kusa, forest shrubs	Sacred wilderness and ascetic refuge
Kamyaka Forest	Medicinal grasses and trees	Site of exile and moral testing
Himalayan Region	Sanjivani, Jatamansi	Source of rare medicinal knowledge

The repeated association of forests with wisdom and healing suggests that the epics articulate an environmental ethic rooted in reverence for biodiversity and ecological balance.

Challenges of Botanical Identification

Identification of plants mentioned in the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedic literature and other ancient Indian texts is a complex and highly interdisciplinary field of inquiry combining botany, philology, Ayurveda, ethnobotany, history and literary studies. Scholars have tried to match these ancient botanical references with modern species, to understand their medicinal, cultural and ecological importance. But this effort is often hampered by linguistic ambiguities, changes over time, ecological transformations, and interpretive difficulties. Consequently many of the epic plants cannot be identified with absolute certainty. Today’s botanical identifications are better understood as carefully reasoned scholarly reconstructions attempting to make sense of ancient textual knowledge with the help of modern scientific knowledge, rather than definitive scientific conclusions, and revealing both the richness of India’s botanical heritage and the methodological complexities involved in its recovery.

1. Polysemous Sanskrit Terminology

One of the major problems in identification of plants mentioned in the ancient Indian texts is the polysemous nature of Sanskrit terminology where a single term can have multiple meanings depending on its literary, regional, historical or cultural context. Sanskrit texts often name plants by appearance, medicinal properties, habitat, ritual role or symbolic significance rather than by precise botanical description, so that the same term can refer to different species and different terms to the same plant. The complexity can be observed in the case of Soma which can be a sacred plant, a ritual drink, a deity and a spiritual concept all at once and Sanjivani which can be a life - restoring quality rather than a specific species. The richness of linguistic and semantic nuance here presents a major obstacle to precise taxonomic identification, requiring scholars to traverse several layers of meaning before they can connect ancient plant references with modern botanical classifications.

2. Regional Variation in Plant Nomenclature

One of the major challenges in the identification of epic plants is the regional variation in plant nomenclature across

the vast geographical, linguistic and cultural diversity of India. One medicinal plant may have many local names, and the same name may refer to completely different species in different areas. The identification of the plants is made all the more difficult as the classical Sanskrit names of plants have been adapted to the local flora through the ages. Thus, plants recognized in North Indian systems of Ayurveda may be different species in South Indian, Himalayan, or tribal medicinal systems. This complex yet rich ethnobotanical diversity makes it difficult to establish definitive correlations between epic plant references and modern botanical taxa. This challenge is particularly evident in the case of legendary herbs such as Vishalyakarani, Sandhanakarani and Suvarnakarani, whose exact botanical identities remain elusive despite much scholarly effort.

3. Changes in Vegetation Patterns Over Centuries

Another major problem in the botanical identification of epic plants is the dramatic changes in the patterns of vegetation over the centuries. Climate change, deforestation, agricultural expansion, urbanization, species migration and environmental degradation have drastically changed the composition and distribution of plant communities across the Indian subcontinent. Some of the plants referred to in ancient literature may have become rare or locally extinct, or may have been replaced in their original habitats. In the sacred landscapes of Dandakaranya, Chitrakuta, Naimisharanya and the Himalayan regions too, ecological transformation has been quite substantial and it is difficult to reconstruct the biodiversity of the epic times. Many of the plants were described in ecological contexts that may not be found in the same form today, so matching them to modern equivalents often requires informed speculation, illustrating the challenges of connecting ancient botanical references with modern species and environments.

4. Mythic and Symbolic Dimensions of Certain Plants

Another major problem for botanical identification is the mythic and symbolic dimensions of epic plants. Many plants in Indian literature function, not just as biological entities, but as powerful religious, philosophical and literary symbols. Plants like Sanjivani, Soma and Kalpavriksha are often sacred and are associated with ideas that transcend their physical features and represent life, immortality, divine grace, spiritual enlightenment and cosmic abundance. For example, Sanjivani is the symbol of hope, rejuvenation and life's victory over death, while Soma is both a holy plant, ritual drink, god and a means to spiritual transcendence. Since these plants function on symbolic as well as botanical levels, their narrative significance often supersedes the need for accurate empirical description. The literal botanic references need to be separated from the deeper symbolic meanings, and thus it is important to scholars, since translating these plants into a single modern species may obscure their rich cultural, spiritual, and philosophical significance.

5. Later Ayurvedic Reinterpretations of Epic References

Another important obstacle to identifying epic plants is the reinterpretation of ancient textual references by later Ayurvedic texts. As the Ayurvedic tradition grew, physicians, commentators and scholars endeavored to classify and identify the plants mentioned in the epics, often

adding them to the developing medical traditions. Though these interpretations were well accepted, they are not always directly supported by the original epic descriptions. A good example is the common identification of Sanjivani with *Selaginella bryopteris*, which is based primarily on later traditional and Ayurvedic associations rather than on explicit evidence from the Ramayana. Similar reinterpretations exist for a number of legendary herbs whose identities have been reconstructed through centuries of commentary, medicinal practice and cultural transmission. While these interpretations are invaluable to our comprehension of the development of Indian medical knowledge, they may also reflect later scholarly and therapeutic traditions than those of the original intent of the epic narratives. It is therefore important to distinguish carefully between the plants described in the epics and the botanical identifications attributed to them in later Ayurvedic literature.

The challenge of botanical identification cannot be solved through botany alone. It requires an interdisciplinary approach combining:

- Sanskrit philology and textual criticism.
- Ethnobotany and traditional ecological knowledge.
- Ayurvedic literature and pharmacology.
- Historical geography and environmental history.
- Archaeobotany and paleoecology.
- Comparative cultural studies.

Only through the integration of these disciplines can researchers approach a more accurate understanding of epic plants and their significance.

The modern scholar is aware that the significance of epic plants is not limited to their exact botanical classification. Although it may often be difficult to be absolutely sure of the exact identification, the meanings in terms of culture, medicine, ecology, symbolism and philosophy attached to these plants are equally, if not more important. Therefore, the proposed botanical identifications should be viewed as well-informed scholarly reconstructions based on linguistic, historical, ecological and Ayurvedic evidence, rather than as established scientific facts. Given the complex mythological and symbolic aspects of many epic plants, it is quite possible that more than one interpretation may be valid, and hence the importance of interdisciplinary investigation, critical judgment and a thorough comprehension of these plants as repositories of knowledge, tradition and cultural value within the Indian Knowledge System.

It is difficult to botanically identify the plants mentioned in the Indian epics due to linguistic ambiguities, regional names for plants, changes in the ecology over time, symbolic and mythological interpretations and later Ayurvedic re-interpretations. Although these factors frequently exclude definitive taxonomic identification, they do not diminish the great value of epic botanical studies. They instead reveal the extraordinary depth of botanical, medicinal, ecological, cultural and philosophical knowledge contained in ancient Indian literature. The interdisciplinary approach to these plants, combining botany, philology, Ayurveda, history, ecology, and literary studies, can help scholars to get a holistic worldview in which nature, medicine, spirituality, mythology, and environmental ethics are closely linked. Hence, the significance of epic plants lies not simply in knowing their species, but in comprehending their role as treasuries of traditional knowledge and as

perennial exemplars of the integrated wisdom of the Indian Knowledge System

Discussion

The plant references in Ramayana and Mahabharata suggest that ancient Indian civilization had very integrated knowledge of medicine, spirituality, ecology and ethics; plants were not just biological resources but were also medicinal agents, ritual instruments, narrative catalysts, symbols of morality and manifestations of divine power. These epics demonstrate an advanced ecological consciousness in which healing, responsibility for the environment, and spiritual well-being are inseparably linked. The reappearance of medicinal herbs is a reminder of a rich tradition of utilitarian botanical knowledge that blossomed into the scientific discipline of Ayurveda and bridged the gap between epic culture and classical medical literature. The epics conserved and passed on precious knowledge through the ages by knitting ecological and medicinal wisdom into the body of narrative traditions, making ecological literacy an essential component of the cultural consciousness. Moreover, the continued use of many of the epic plants in present-day Ayurveda is an attestation of the practical basis of this knowledge system. Thus the Ramayana and Mahabharata are not only literary masterpieces, but also repositories of traditional ecological knowledge, embodying a holistic world view in which medicine, religion, ecology and literature encompass each other to form a single intellectual framework. This integrated vision remains highly relevant today and provides valuable insights for sustainability, biodiversity conservation, holistic health care and preservation of indigenous knowledge systems.

Conclusion

The herbs and shrubs of the Ramayana and Mahabharata are not merely background props of epic landscapes; they are dynamic agents that shape narrative, medicine, spirituality and philosophy within the Indian Knowledge System. Sanjeevani, Soma, Brahmi and Triphala are some of the plants that represent healing, resurrection, communion with the divine, the pursuit of wisdom, longevity and holistic well-being. They are life-saving remedies, sacred objects of ritual, narrative catalysts and symbols of ethical and spiritual ideals. Their presence reveals a sophisticated ecological worldview in which human health, spiritual growth, moral responsibility and environmental harmony are closely linked. The epics contain a rich store of traditional ecological and botanical knowledge extending beyond practical medicine to ritual practice, moral philosophy, cultural symbolism and environmental ethics. In these epics, plants are shown to be active participants in heroic deeds, sacred rituals, and spiritual transformations, reinforcing the idea that nature is not a commodity to be exploited but a divine co-worker in the sustenance of life and the preservation of dharma. In the end, the plants of the Indian epics emerge as co-creators of meaning, guardians of health and enduring symbols of the deep relationship between humankind, ecology and the cosmic order offering timeless insights relevant to today's concerns of biodiversity

conservation, sustainable healthcare and the protection of indigenous knowledge systems.

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