**Large quantities of semal are cut in south Rajasthan**

Large quantities of semal are cut in south Rajasthan and sold in Udaipur. The price varies from ₹500 to ₹1,500 per tree, depending on size. The cutting violates the Rajasthan Forest Act 1953 and the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980. Once ubiquitous, the crimson semal flower is now a rare sight

On the eve of Holi in Udaipur, Subash Chowk, a prominent intersection surrounded by luxury hotels, is transformed. Bhajans and Bollywood songs blare from speakers and firecrackers fly into the sky. In the centre stands the Holika Dahan, a 50-foot-high tree sheathed in hay and set ablaze, sending tongues of flame leaping over a two-storey building. Locals and tourists alike throng the chowk to catch a glimpse. They circle the bonfire and celebrate a mythological victory of good over evil. This is one of Udaipur’s main attractions for Holi.

Central to the Holika Dahan festivities is the silk cotton tree (Bombax ceiba L.), known locally as semal. Traditionally, the debarked stem or branch of a semal tree is used as the bonfire’s main pillar.

“It is astonishing to see the ecologically important semal tree in Udaipur’s tallest Holika Dahan. Its roots, fruits, seeds, stem, stem bark, and gum are all medicinally valuable,” Vartika Jain, an assistant professor at the Government Meera Girls’ College, Udaipur, wrote recently on the ‘Semal Conservation Mission’ Facebook group.

In 2009, Dr. Jain co-authored a paper reporting that around 1,500-2,000 trees or branches of semal were cut, debarked, and ignited during Holi in the Udaipur district in that year.

Dr. Jain’s work suggests the situation is no better in 2024. Large quantities of semal are cut in southern Rajasthan, in places like Bhil and Garasia, and sold in Udaipur.

The cutting violates a panoply of laws, from the Rajasthan Forest Act 1953 to the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980. The price varies from ₹500 to ₹1,500 per tree, depending on its size. Once ubiquitous in the region, the crimson semal flower is now a rare sight.

**Holding the forest together**

Apart from the flowers, the silk cotton tree is characterised by its spiked trunk and fluffy seed pods, and is native to India. “It has multiple purposes and is useful to wild animals, insects, and even to tribal communities,” Satish Sharma, the ex-assistant conservator of forests, Udaipur, and an expert on Rajasthan’s biodiversity, said over phone.

According to Dr. Jain, semal is an integral species that holds the forest ecosystem together. The rock bees nestle on its branches because the tree’s spikes keep its predator, the sloth bears, away. Members of tribal communities consume the tree’s reddish root for food during the monsoons. Larvae of the moth Bucculatrix crateracma feed on its leaves. The golden-crowned sparrow weaves the lining of its nests with white cotton from its seeds.

The Dysdercus bugs, the Indian crested porcupine, Hanuman langurs, and some other species feast on the nectar in its flowers. It is, as Dr. Jain put it, a “one-tree wildlife sanctuary”.

Members of the Garasia tribe in the area also believe they are descended from semal trees.

To them and others, it provides opportunities for agroforestry and resources like food, fodder, and fuel wood. Members of the Kathodi tribe use its wood to craft musical instruments while those of the Bhil use it to make utensils.

‘Both conservation and destruction’

The communities’ relationship with the semal is more strained today, however. Many members of these communities ‘prepare’ these trees for Holi in Udaipur and other parts of the state.

“They don’t make much money from selling semal, but because they don’t have to grow, water, or protect it, the costs and effort are minimal, making semal sales beneficial for them,” according to Mr. Sharma.

After 37 years with the forest department, he said he’s seen both the “conservation and the destruction of semal”.

In this way, the semal disappeared from the forests of south Rajasthan, which in turn prompted those selling the tree to mix individuals of Ailanthus excelsa, Lannea coromandelica and Nyctanthes arbor-tristis trees in their sales.

“The loss of a single species is detrimental to the whole environment,” Dr. Jain said. She has been trying to protect the trees for more than 15 years. Mr. Sharma calls her the “Semal Lady of Rajasthan”.

In 2008, Dr. Jain began the ‘Semal Conservation Mission’ under the Society for Microvita Research and Integrated Medicine. The mission is an amorphous group of doctors, businesspersons, forest officers, sociologists, and other researchers united in raising awareness of the importance of the semal tree through articles in journals, magazines, and newspapers; they also distribute pamphlets in schools and colleges. Members of the group have also planted more than 500 semal trees in and around Udaipur and have pushed for Holi celebrations switching the semal with an iron pole draped in dried grass for the bonfire.

**Supply and demand**

To a local news publisher, the city of Udaipur boasted of having organised 500 Holika Dahan events in 2024 alone. But in rural areas, these events are communal and thus rarer. Many villages come together to light a single Holika Dahan. Gamda Pal, famous for lighting the Holika Dahan in daylight, hosts visitors from 10 villages. “The rural and tribal communities make sparing use of semal,” Mr. Sharma said. “It is the urbanites who need to understand. There will be supply if there is demand from urban areas.”

So, he added, the key to this aspect of protecting Rajasthan’s semal lies with the state’s cities.

This is why he said he stresses the importance of raising awareness in Udaipur rather than among the tribal communities, whose members are responding to demand.

Tribal communities rely on small plots of agricultural land, some livestock, and manual labour for their income. They also gather and sell minor forest products like bamboo, Pongamia pinnata seeds, and mahua (Madhuca longifolia) flowers. They also wish to take advantage of the abundance of semal in south Rajasthan and the high demand from Udaipur. None of the experts with whom this reporter spoke suggested State failure is a factor.

**No study since 2009**

Curbing demand hasn’t been easy. Many Holika Dahan events enjoy the patronage of businesspersons, shopkeepers, and local transport operators’ association interested in boosting tourist footfall. “There is disinterest in the administration, [in] our local municipal bodies, to legally and ecologically protect this species,” Sunil Dubey, an environmentalist in Udaipur, said.

Despite years of damage, there is little documentation of the decline in the semal population. Since 2008, Dr. Jain’s Semal Conservation Mission has been tracking the sale of semal in Udaipur, yet only a single study from 2009 has documented the species’s decline in the region. Neither the Forest Department nor other researchers have made efforts to document the loss.

The Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Rajasthan’s Forest Department head Munish Kumar Garg didn’t respond to a request for comment.

As a result, the tree is not recorded in the state’s list of ‘rare, threatened, and endangered’ species. (Trees on this list enjoy priority conservation efforts.) Dr. Jain is concerned semal “will soon join the list” if its members continue to meet fiery deaths on Holi.