

Khejri tree, a boon for Thar Desert, India

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Prosopis cineraria (L.) Druce (Fabaceae), locally known as 'Khejri', is the key stone species of the Thar Desert of Rajasthan. It is the state tree of Rajasthan and has become an integral part of the cultural, social, and traditional lives of the local people. It is ecologically valued in the desert region for its soil binding capacity, deep tap root, soil fertility improvement, and yield augmentation of understory crops. It is a drought-resistant tree and can tolerate extreme temperatures up to 48°C and less than 100 mm of rainfall. It provides food, livelihoods, shelter, and shade to the locals, travellers, shepherds, and to animals. The young pods are used as vegetables and are commonly known as 'Sangri'. The pulp of pods is sweet and is also used as fodder for livestock. The mature dried pods are called 'Khokha' and are eaten raw as well as vegetables. Its leaves and shoots are used as vegetables by the local inhabitants and as fodder for cattle. The gum obtained from the young plants known as 'Bantaka' is eaten by many people during the months of summer and used in the preparation of sweets. The decoction of twigs and flowers is reported to be anti-diabetic. Leaf extracts showed antibacterial, antihyperglycemic, antihyperlipidemic, and antioxidant activities. Consumption of dry pods of Khejri is known to prevent protein and mineral deficiency. The green and unripe pods are also used in the preparation of curries and pickles. The wood is used in making carts, agricultural implements, house holding articles, house building materials, toys, and firewood. The bark is used in rheumatism, and the pods are used as an astringent. Pregnant women consume pulverized flowers combined with sugar to prevent miscarriage. Flowering and fruiting occur during the summer season (March–June), and the protein-rich new leaf formation occurs from the end of summer to the beginning of rain. The tree is useful for birds as well as animals. Birds consume the pods of this plant. It is a suitable species of tree for many bird species to utilize as a nesting site. Honeybees collect nectar from their flowers, make beehives on trees, and produce the best quality honey. Being a nitrogen-fixing tree, it improves the fertility of the soil. In addition to being utilized by people for its fruit and leaves, the Khejri tree is a lifeline to Rajasthan's desert ecosystems because it offers several animals food and refuge. The trees are heavily lopped, particularly during the winter months when no other green fodder is available in the dry tracts. There is a popular saying that death will not visit a man, even at the time of a famine, if he has a Khejri tree, a goat, and a camel, since the three together are somewhat said to sustain a man even under the most desiccating conditions. The lopped branches are good as fencing material. The editorial highlights the Khejri tree's sustainable use, the necessity of adding value in accordance with modern expectations, and conservation-related issues.