

## **Revisiting Traditional Knowledge on Flora through the Lens of Ruskin Bond**

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**Bincy Isaac**, Department of English, DSCK Post Graduate College, Mau, Uttar Pradesh,  
India

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### **Abstract**

Traditional knowledge refers to the knowledge, innovations, and practices of indigenous peoples developed from experience gained over the centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment; traditional knowledge is often transmitted orally from generation to generation. Plants provide us with food, fodder, fuel, medicine, timber, fibres, fruit, etc. The traditional methods of using plants as medicines have played an important role in our ancient system of health care. Ruskin Bond's writings, especially the short stories, are a storehouse of his exceptional knowledge about the trees and their medicinal worth. The Present paper tries to enumerate some trees and plants that Bond depicts in his works and the importance of tribal communities. It is nature, which nourish and feed us, it's nature: the nature that made these trees and us.

**Keywords:** plants, trees, medicinal, traditional knowledge, Ruskin Bond

### **Introduction:**

Ruskin Bond, the most acclaimed short story writer, mentions that trees have always played a significant role in Bond's life. He states that even at Landour, "the trees stand watch over my day-to-day life. They are the guardians of my conscience. I have no one else to answer to, so I live and work under the generous but highly principled supervision of the trees – especially the deodars, who stand on guard, unbending, on the slope above the cottage." (Bond 121). Ruskin sometimes highlights that forests are repositories of plants of medicinal value and marks their pre-eminence. Also, the forest is a part of tribal life and is associated with their culture, tradition, values, and religious beliefs. They are emotionally attached to Nature. They use the natural resources according to their need, never exploiting nature for future savings. The imperialist intervention in the peripheral zone of the tribals has made a drastic change in the self-reliant tribal economic system. In the name of development, thousands of trees are being cut down, and rapid urbanization and industrialization are resulting in deforestation.

Ruskin Bond in *The Blue Umbrella* refers to the cherry tree "a wild cherry tree growing crookedly out of the rocks and hanging across the chasm" (*The Blue Umbrella* 7). He describes a cherry tree that grows crookedly out of the rocks and hangs across the chasm. Traditional knowledge about this tree tells us that Cherries are packed with antioxidants and offer many health benefits, including help with insomnia, joint pain. Cherries are a good

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source of melatonin, which helps to regulate our sleep cycles. They are rich in antioxidants and cardiovascular benefits, reduce the risk of high cholesterol, blood pressure, and diabetes, and lower the risk of gout. Vandana Shiva, in her *Staying Alive*, states that natural forests stay barren due to monoculture plantation of commercial species. (4)

Bond narrates the pine forest of the Himalayan region throughout the story, "Blue Umbrella". "Binya sat down in the shade of a pine tree" (*The Blue Umbrella* 6). Pine forests are the largest in the Indo-Pacific area. In India, the Himalayan subtropical pine forests stretch across the low hills of the Great Himalayan range. Pine tree is full of medicinal worth according to traditional knowledge, it is a daily dose of vitamin C or during colds, flus, or bronchitis to help loosen mucous and encourage productive coughing, while soothing the throat and lungs. The vitamin content and anti-bacterial action also help your body fight colds. It can be used internally as a tincture to fight respiratory infections or colds. The Purulia of West Bengal, a carefully grown forest of sal, palash, kendu, paisal, wild jamun, Jackfruit, amla, plum, and other species, would have provided the region with food, fuel, and various means of livelihood.

The next tree that Bond refers to is the Oak trees: "About four years previously, Biju had knocked a hive out of an oak tree" (9). Oak trees are found in the temperate areas of the Himalayas. Indigenous people, in many areas of the world, use them as antiseptics and to treat gastrointestinal tract (GIT) disorders such as diarrhoea and haemorrhoids. They act as antioxidants, antimicrobials, anti-inflammatories, antidiabetics, hepatoprotectives, and cure skin disorders. Bond also implies that, additionally, numerous plants conserved by the communities are utilized as antidotes for snake bites and scorpion stings, as well as by traditional healers to set bone fractures, treat wounds or arthritis, and function as abortifacients and remedies for menstrual issues.

Bond mentions many trees in his short story *My Father's Trees in Dehra*. He says, "I have to walk only a furlong to reach my grandfather's house. The road is lined with eucalyptus, jacaranda, and laburnum trees." (36-45). The road is lined with eucalyptus, jacaranda, and laburnum trees. The traditional medicine acknowledges Eucalyptus to cure colds and respiratory problems, tooth ailments, and dental care, fungal infections, diabetes, bladder disorders and stimulating immune system. Jacaranda species have also been used traditionally to treat venereal infections, gastrointestinal disorders, leishmaniasis, colds and rheumatism. According to Mahasweta Devi "hunting, fruit, root, tuber, leaf and seed gathering are fast receding into oblivion with the cutting down of natural forests" (Ghatak 176).

Ruskin Bond also refers to bilberries/European Blueberries in his story "Binya passes by". Bilberries are seen in the Himalayas too. Bilberries are potent antioxidants that can strengthen blood vessels and capillary walls, improve red blood cells, stabilize collagen tissues such as ligaments and cartilage, and have cholesterol-lowering effects. They are used to treat diarrhoea because they act as an astringent to gastro gastrointestinal tract and to treat several conditions, including diabetes. Thus, the traditional knowledge lists so many medicinal properties of the bilberry.

**Tribal Knowledge Systems: Past, Present, and Future**

It is believed that the tribal community is one of the most important groups in the world, possessing valuable knowledge about ecology. It is crucial not to underestimate the role that tribal people play in the conservation of Nature. Since the dawn of civilization, these ethnic and indigenous communities have worked to conserve the biodiversity in and around their natural habitats. They protect a variety of plants that serve as sources of wild edible food, including roots, tubers, rhizomes, seeds, and fruits, as well as agricultural and horticultural crops. (103) The separation of these tribes from their ancestral forests and their subsequent entrapment in bonded labour can be linked to the historical context of deforestation. Previously inhabiting forested and mountainous regions, these tribal communities possessed distinctive cultures and self-sufficient economic systems. However, they were forcibly removed from their traditional lands due to extensive deforestation initiated by the British Empire, along with forest clearing and land conversion projects implemented by the subsequent independent Indian government. The indigenous culture and lifestyle of the region underwent significant disruption with the onset of British colonial rule. The colonial administration's policies of large-scale deforestation, aimed at generating revenue through timber exports and land conversion, had a profound impact on the local ecosystem and community. "Previously, the tribals could cope with disease and natural vagaries, with the help of their indigenous knowledge" (Ghatak 234). They were able to cure themselves, but all that is gone. "They can't now fight the onslaught of numerous diseases, as the medicinal herbs have vanished together with the receding forests" (234).

**Conclusion**

Ecology is fundamentally the exploration of how living organisms engage with their surroundings, be it in natural ecosystems or human-altered environments. Understanding these intricate relationships is essential for fostering a sustainable future. Bond thus refers to all these trees in the context to reiterate the need to save the plants which are the potential for man's health. Knowledge on different uses of plants has been gathered by people over millennia and passed on orally from generation to generation. Bond displays his knowledge of native plant varieties and weaves brilliant stories around them, often emphasising their worth for mankind. These plants are the source of treasures to lead a healthy life. He inspires the readers, particularly the younger generation, to plant these living treasures in their surroundings.

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