

Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi

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The Flame of the Forest

A clear blue sky provided the canvas. Flashes of red flew off the imaginary painter's brushes. Dabs of green and brown completed the work of art. I was standing below a flowering tree with brilliant red flowers. The tree, aptly named the Flame of the Forest *Butea monosperma* is currently flowering all over Dehradun. Each time I look at the magnificent tree, I envision that an



imaginary painter has been at work, dotting the landscape of Dehradun with these master pieces. Such is nature's impact!

The Flame of the Forest is a medium sized, deciduous tree. In late December and January, the tree is leafless, and presents an ugly sight. As the spring approaches, buds emerge, and suddenly the tree bursts into bloom, with its magnificent red flowers.

One morning, last week, as I stood below the tree, I noticed that I was not the only one interested in the tree. The Rose-ringed Parakeet, a common bird in Dehradun, was feasting on the soft parts of the red flowers, ignoring the buzzing honey bees circling around it. Its smaller cousin, the Slatyheaded Parakeet, descended on the tree and got frowned upon. How dare you eat on my tree! A male Purple Sunbird, with its glistening purple sheen, dipped into the flame-red flowers to partake its nectar. Seeing a female sunbird nearby set the bird's heart going *dhak-dhak*. The male called excitedly-see what a flowery feast I've laid for you. The female sunbird threw a scornful look at the male, ignored him and flew away alone-I am sure a lot of guys are familiar with the treatment! A Lesser White-throat, a small non-descript insect eating bird, landed on the tree, looking to feast on the honey bees. A few minutes of unsuccessful hunting and it was on its way to search for easier prey. Two butterflies wafted in-the Cabbage White and the Hill Jezebel, and helped themselves to some nectar. Then a Rhesus Macaque arrived, and chased all the birds and butterflies away and ended my morning of nature watching. Spoilsport! In regale fashion, he sat and feasted on the flowers, giving me dirty looks, as though saying-haven't you seen a monkey eat?!

The tree's flowers herald the arrival of spring and the Holi season. Soon the leaves will begin to emerge, three leaves to a stem. These leaves are the food plant for the caterpillars of the Common Emigrant butterfly. In fact, not only does the tree provide useful food to a number of insects, birds and mammals, its flowers are used to make dyes, including *gulal* for Holi. This year, pick up the red flowers of this tree which have fallen on the ground, soak them overnight in a bucket of water, and you will have ready-to-use coloured water for Holi.

The Flame of the Forest is called *Dhak* or *Palas* in Hindi. I believe that it is called so, because each time you see its magnificent flame red flowers, your heart begins to go *dhak-dhak*, just like the sunbird!

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Making a difference: Avoid colours using toxic chemicals and use only natural colours this Holi.