

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

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Semal-Simply Spectacular!

The festival of Holi creeps upon us. Completely synchronized, nature has splashed colours on its own canvas. The azure blue sky is silhouetted by the flame red colours of the flowering trees of Dhak, Semal and Coral. I wrote about the *Dhak* last year, and have been getting nasty looks from the other trees-why are you ignoring our credentials as PYT's-pretty young trees!

Not wanting to face the wrath of nature's beautiful people, I decided it was time to appease at least one of these trees! I walked up to the Semal or the Red Silk Cotton Tree (*Bombax ceiba*). The Semal is majestic-a large deciduous tree (its almost leafless at this time of the year), its branches spiral radially outward from the trees main trunk. Clusters of large, red flowers adorn its barren branches.



As I stood underneath the tree, red petals fluttered down gracefully. The tree was abuzz with activity. Greedy Rose-ringed parakeets, wasting almost as much as they ate, gorged on the sepals and the petals of the Semal flower. Joining the parakeets on their feast were a host of other birds. I counted five species of myna nibbling at the red flowers. The aggressive Spangled Drongos seemed to think they owned the

tree and chased away any birds that came close to them. A flock of Jungle Babblers hopped onto the tree, frowned at the drongo's antics, and with a few baleful looks which said "Keep your tree" to the drongo, they were on their way.

Picking up the fallen red flowers of the tree, I observed that the flower's sepals were thick and juicy, and hence a favourite with the birds. Buds, starting as dull oval blobs, grow to a conical shape as the flower starts to assert itself, and finally the flower bursts forth into a bright red bloom. The fruit has white silky cotton fibres inside, which explains the name of the tree. In fact, Bombax, means "silk worm" in Greek! When the seeds form on the tree, the white silky hairs attach themselves to the seeds and help them drift through their dispersal journey. The white silky hairs have been used as stuffing for pillows and mattresses.

I noticed that many of the younger trees had large, conical thorns on the lower tree trunk. These thorns protect the tree from grazing cattle when the tree is young. As the tree grows, it no longer has use for the thorns, which then are shed by the tree. I wondered-are trees intelligent? Can they think? How else did they evolve a strategy to protect themselves?

I noticed that not all the trees had red flowers-some were orange, and other yellow. Why cannot I be different said some rebellious teen tree!

In many trees, the lower branches had been lopped off by humans, leaving the tree looking forlorn. Gnarled stubs in place of branches were a grim reminder that humans continued to play havoc with this beautiful tree. And with the environment at large.

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Making a difference: Don't lop trees, even in your garden. Trees get their food from their roots and leaves. Once you lop its branches, trees lose one source of their food, and hence grow slowly.

Photograph caption: Semal flowers blooming