

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

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The "Ber" Story

I was strolling down the narrow path surrounded by thorny scrub and grass, at the outskirts of Dehradun. As I walked, I was talking to Anchal, my wife, over my shoulder. After a few minutes of jabbering, I realised I was talking to myself! I looked back and Anchal was nowhere to be seen. Searching for her, I realised that she had moved off the track, and was standing behind a small bush, off the path.

Not only had she left me to my own devices, she was standing at the bush and devouring its fruit. Striding up to her, I found her gorging on *ber*. *Ber*, *Zizyphus jujuba*, is a well known wild fruit that grows throughout India. As I approached the bush, Anchal said-go find your own bush, this one is mine! This disgruntled soul looked for his own fruiting tree and sure, enough, found another *ber* bush, only a few



meters away. The *ber* bush (sometimes its a tree) fiercely protects its fruit. Its got long, pointed thorns that love to embed themselves in your skin, as you try and reach out for just that one juicy, ripe drupe!

Having plucked a handful of *ber*, I tasted one. Yuck! It was bitter. Abandoning my fruit collection, I moved back to where Anchal was. She was enjoying the *ber*. It turns

out, her bush had really sweet and tasty fruit, while the one I had selected had awful fruit. Its unfair-why do girls have all the fun! And the sweet fruit! My experiences with wild *ber* have always been memorable. On many forest walks, ripe *ber* have provided for a tasty meal in the forest. Best of all, I love rolling the fruit's seed in my mouth after eating its flesh-it is sour, yet has a pleasant taste, which lingers in your mouth.

Around us, the bulbuls were in a frenzy. We were eating all their fruit! The chattering birds tried to shoo us away! Go eat your own food, they seemed to say. The fruit eating birds contribute to the dispersal of seeds of the plant. If they can do so, why can't I? So, as a good naturalist, I threw seeds of *ber* as I walked; some of them would hopefully grow into new shoots next year.

A family of butterflies called the pierrots lay their eggs on this plant, and their caterpillars feed on the *ber* plant's leaves. Knowing this, I have tried to grow *ber* in the garden using saplings, but have been unsuccessful. It is likely that throwing some seeds might bring some more success. Bulbuls-I need your help; spread some *ber* seeds in my garden!

Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

Making a difference: This column has now completed more than two years-something I had never imagined when I had started! The main reason for this is the encouragement I get from all kinds of people. Just the other day, I was in my son's school, and one of the girls came up to me and said-I like to read all your articles! Another student, my son informs me, cuts out these articles to read. By reading about nature, thinking about what you can do to make the earth a better place-YOU are making a difference; keep it up!

Photograph caption: The Ber Fruit

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