

Blooming Glory

The Japanese make such a fuss about their Sakura; why don't we Indians do the same with our Chinar, Laburnum and Shiuli?

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It has been on my bucket list for the longest time ever: visiting Japan during the Sakura season. It is trickier than it sounds. There is never any guarantee when the Sakura will bloom, though forecasters try their best to nail a period down. And once the Sakura does flower, the cherry blossoms have a very short life expectancy: a week if you are lucky. And the Sakura season itself lasts about a fortnight or so. So, unless you time your visit just right—and have the luck of the devil—it is hard to be sure that you will catch the cherry blossoms at their finest.

Well, I am happy to report that even though I planned my trip last year, I was lucky enough to arrive in Tokyo and Kyoto at peak viewing time. And what a view it was! Sprawling trees of all shape and size overlaid with blossoms that went all the way from pristine white to cherry pink, taking in every shade in between for good measure. The Sakura proliferated in the parks, it blossomed on every street corner, it lined the roads in its majestic glory, it even popped up along the rails of the bullet train from Tokyo to Kyoto and back.

But what I found even more amazing was how Sakura viewing was a family activity for the Japanese. They even have a name for it: *Hanami*, which literally means 'flower watching'. And when you do your flower watching at night, it is called *Yozakura*, which literally translates as 'night Sakura'.

So, as the trees in all the parks in Tokyo and Kyoto bloom, entire families set out with a picnic basket to spend the day under the shade of the cherry blossoms. They lay down their plastic sheets on the grass, and settle down to eat, drink and yes (this is Japan after all), use those ubiquitous selfie sticks to take selfies against the backdrop of the blooming Sakura. Not that I can afford to act all superior; I was doing just that as well (though without the obligatory selfie stick).

I couldn't help but wonder why we in India don't celebrate our seasonal marvels with quite the same passion, panache and elegance. It's not as if we don't have the same kind of natural beauty that flashes forth for brief periods to dazzle us before disappearing all too soon.

Take Kashmir's Chinar, for instance, which changes colour to a spectacular russet and then a brilliant crimson in the autumn. The spectacle lasts only for a few weeks before the tree sheds its leaves and shuts down for the winter. This

should be as special for us as the Sakura is for the Japanese. And yet, we don't see people from the rest of India descending on Kashmir to view this superb sight. Indeed, it barely registers with most of us, as we wait for the snowfall to descend so that we can plan a winter vacation.

Closer home, in Delhi, the roads and parks come alive, in spring with the yellow golden gleam of the Laburnum (you may also know this as *Amaltas*) and the bright red of the Semal tree. The flowering period lasts only a few weeks but while it is on it turns the city into a vision of natural beauty. But we hardly spare the blooms a glance before going on about our day. There is none of the overwhelming wonder that the Japanese experience with their Sakura.

Sad, isn't it? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we too could engage in a spot of *Hanami*, taking our kids, our parents, our friends for a day out in the park, to just sit in the shade of a Laburnum or Semal tree and take in their beauty? If we could just lay down a blanket on the grass and bring out a picnic basket, and spend the day marvelling at the beauty of nature? (Of course, it would be even better if we could emulate the Japanese in yet another way: in clearing up and carrying back our own garbage, leaving the area as pristine as ever.)

Growing up in Calcutta, I was as excited as the next child about the advent of Puja. But in all that excitement for pandal-hopping, none of us paid much attention to the flowering Shiuli (it is called *Harshingar* in North India) which heralds the arrival of the Goddess every year.

The white blooms with a peach/pink centre would carpet the floor every morning, spreading their sweet scent through the neighbourhood. And then even before you had fully registered their beauty, the Shiuli flowers would vanish, reappearing only the following year as Durga Puja drew near.

The flowering of the Shiuli should have been as special to Bengalis as the flowering of the Sakura is to the Japanese. Everyone just took its beauty for granted and went on with the festivities. And I can't help but think that we missed a trick there.

Well, spring is almost gone but how about this Puja, we have a special week of just celebrating the Shiuli in all its colourful and fragrant glory as a precursor to the festivities.

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