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Plants used in ganesh festival in Nashik District (M.S.): An ethnobotanical perspective

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Abstract
Ganesh Chaturthi is among Maharashtra's most vibrant community festivals, and Nashik district hosts thousands of household and public installations (sarvajanik mandals) each year. Plant parts—leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds, stems, roots, grasses—are indispensable to ritual observances and festive aesthetics, yet their cultural logic and conservation implications remain under-documented for Nashik. This study synthesizes ethnobotanical literature, market observations, and practitioner narratives to document plants associated with Ganesh worship in Nashik district, map their cultural functions, and discuss sustainability concerns. We catalogue 30 plant taxa (27 genera, 20 families) used as patrī (ritual leaves), pushpa (flowers), naivedya (edible offerings), décor, and ancillary materials. We highlight culturally salient species (e.g., *Cynodon dactylon*, *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*, *Calotropis gigantea*, *Prosopis cineraria*, *Aegle marmelos*, *Ficus* spp.), outline emic categories and symbolic rationales, and propose an eco-cultural protocol for ethical sourcing. The paper argues that safeguarding ritual plant diversity via community nurseries, seasonal harvest guidelines, and local supply chains can reinforce both cultural continuity and urban biodiversity in Nashik.

Keywords: Ganesh chaturthi, ethnobotany, ritual plants, patrī (21 leaves), sacred groves, nashik district, traditional knowledge

Introduction
Ganesh (Gaṇapati) worship foregrounds the auspicious, obstacle-removing deity associated with beginnings, learning, and household prosperity. In Maharashtra, ritual praxis centers on specific plants and plant parts, each attributed a symbolic property (śakti, śuddhi, āyuṣya, vijaya), seasonality, and rule-bounded usage (counts of leaves/grass blades, time of offering). While "21 patrī" is widely recognized, the precise composition varies by locality, lineage (paramparā), and priestly instruction. Nashik—comprising urban Nashik city and semi-rural talukas with vineyards, orchards, and sacred groves—offers a unique mosaic of sources and practices. This paper documents (i) plant diversity engaged during Ganesh Chaturthi in Nashik district; (ii) emic logics of selection and substitution; and (iii) conservation and supply-chain issues, with recommendations for sustainable, culturally respectful practice.

1. Rationale and significance
- **Cultural heritage:** Plants encode ritual memory and moral instruction; documenting them guards against loss through urbanization and market homogenization.
- **Biodiversity:** Harvest pressure on wild species (e.g., *Calotropis*, *Prosopis cineraria*, *Ficus* spp.) increases in late monsoon; sustainable harvest is essential.
- **Education:** Ethnobotanical documentation supports curriculum in Botany, Ayurveda/AYUSH, and Cultural Studies.

2. Objectives
1. Compile a curated catalogue of plants used in Ganesh festival in Nashik district with local (Marathi) names, parts used, and roles.
2. Describe use categories and symbolic/health associations as expressed by practitioners.
3. Identify sustainability concerns and propose an eco-cultural sourcing protocol for Nashik.

Study Area: Nashik District
Nashik district lies in north-western Maharashtra on the Deccan basalt plateau, bounded by the Sahyadri (Western Ghats) to the west. Agro-ecology spans rain-shadow plains to hill ranges, with monsoonal rainfall (June–September). Crops include grapes, onions, millets, paddy pockets, and horticultural orchards (mango, guava, pomegranate). Urban Nashik hosts dense networks of flower markets (e.g., Panchavati, Raviwar Karanja), neighborhood puja shops, and seasonal vendors supplying patrī and flowers during Ganesh Chaturthi.

Methodology
This is a scoping ethnobotanical study integrating: (a) a literature review on Maharashtrian Ganesh ritual flora; (b) rapid market observation in Nashik city during the fortnight surrounding Ganesh Chaturthi; and (c) informal conversations with household practitioners, priests, and vendors. Species identifications follow standard regional floras where available; Marathi names reflect common Nashik usage. Because practices vary, we report a **core list** corroborated across sources and note alternatives/substitutions. No endangered taxa were intentionally collected; this study emphasizes non-destructive documentation and ethics.

1. Use categories
- Patrī (ritual leaves/offered foliage)
- Pushpa (flowers/garlands)
- Naivedya/Phal (edible plant offerings)

Sahāyaka (ancillary materials: torans, rangoli, incense resins, oil, wicks)

Ethnobotanical Enumerations

Sr.No.	Botanical name	Family	Local name	Part used	Primary role in festival	Notes/associations
1	*Cynodon dactylon* (L)Pers.	Poaceae	Durvā	Blades	Core offering to Gaṇesha	Symbol of longevity/coolness; highly preferred.
2	*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis* (red) L.	Malvaceae	Jaswand	Flower	Pushpa; favorite flower	Red hibiscus widely offered to Gaṇesha.
3	*Calotropis gigantean* (L)Dryand	Apocynaceae	Rui/Arka/Mandar	Leaf, flower	Patrī; also used on immersion day in some lineages	Potent, handled respectfully; avoid over-harvest of wild shrubs.
4	*Prosopis cineraria* (L)Druce	Fabaceae	Shami	Leaf/twig	Patrī; auspicious (victory/protection)	Locally planted; do not strip branches.
5	*Aegle marmelos* (L) Correa	Rutaceae	Bel	Leaflet (trifoliate)	Patrī (varies by lineage)	More typical for Śiva; included in some Ganesh patrī sets in Maharashtra.
6	*Ficus benghalensis* L.	Moraceae	Vad	Leaf	Patrī	Sacred fig of prosperity/continuity.
7	*Ficus religiosa* L.	Moraceae	Pimpal	Leaf	Patrī	Sacred fig of sanctity; use fallen leaves when possible.
8	*Ficus racemosa* L.	Moraceae	Audumbar/Umbar	Leaf	Patrī	Associated with Dattatreya; common in Nashik ghats.
9	*Achyranthes aspera* L.	Amaranthaceae	Aghāda	Leaf/inflorescence	Patrī	Widely cited in the "21 patrī" across Maharashtra.
10	*Vitex negundo* L.	Lamiaceae	Nirgundi	Leaf	Patrī (protective)	Aromatic; insect-repelling foliage.
11	*Pongamia pinnata* (L.) Pierre	Fabaceae	Karanj	Leaf	Patrī	Oil-seed tree; sustainable harvest from planted avenues advised.
12	*Azadirachta indica* A. Juss	Meliaceae	Neem	Leaf	Patrī	Purificatory connotations; bitter principle.
13	*Terminalia arjuna* (Roxb. ex DC) Wight & Arn	Combretaceae	Arjun	Leaf	Patrī	Sacred riverine tree; use pruned leaves.
14	*Mangifera indica* L.	Anacardiaceae	Āmba	Leaf (toran)	Sahāyaka décor/torans; sometimes patrī	Ubiquitous leaf garlands at doorways/pandals.
15	*Musa paradisiacal* L.	Musaceae	Keli/Kel	Leaf, pseudostem sheath	Décor; naivedya (banana)	Banana leaves flank the idol; fruit offered daily.
16	*Cocos nucifera* L.	Arecaceae	Nāral	Fruit	Naivedya; kalash; décor	Central to pūjā; tender coconut sometimes offered.
17	*Areca catechu L.*	Arecaceae	Supari	Seed (areca nut)	Ancillary offering	Often combined with betel leaf after aarti.
18	*Piper betle* L.	Piperaceae	Pān	Leaf	Ancillary offering	Offered with supari; avoid plastic-tied bundles.
19	*Nelumbo nucifera* Gaerth,	Nelumbonaceae	Kamal	Flower	Pushpa; high prestige	Source from licensed growers; avoid wild extraction.
20	*Nymphaea nouchali* Burm.f.	Nymphaeaceae	Kumudini	Flower	Pushpa	Alternative to lotus where lotus unavailable.
21	*Tagetes erecta* L..	Asteraceae	Zendu	Flowers	Garlands, décor	Locally cultivated; dominant market flower.
22	*Jasminum sambac* (L.) Aiton	Oleaceae	Mogra	Flowers	Garlands	Often combined with zendu and leaves.
23	*Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* L.	Oleaceae	Parijat	Flowers	Pushpa (morning offerings)	Seasonal; fragrant; shed flowers collected respectfully.
24	*Butea monosperma* (Lam.) Taub.	Fabaceae	Palāsh	Leaf	Patrī; plates (pattal) in some contexts	More available in rural talukas.
25	*Saraca asoca* (Roxb.) Wild	Fabaceae	Ashoka	Leaf/flower	Patrī (variant)	Availability limited; use cultivated sources.
26	*Ricinus communis* L.	Euphorbiaceae	Erand	Leaf	Patrī	Used in some local lists; handle with care (toxic seeds).
27	*Psidium guajava* L.	Myrtaceae	Peru	Leaf/fruit	Naivedya (fruit); patrī (variant)	Common in-home gardens.
28	*Punica granatum* L.	Lythraceae	Dālimb	Fruit/leaf	Naivedya (fruit); patrī (variant)	Seasonal availability.
29	*Curcuma longa* L.	Zingiberaceae	Halad	Rhizome/leaf	Tilak (turmeric paste); rangoli	Often home-grown or market-bought.
30	*Oryza sativa* L.	Poaceae	Taṇḍul (Akshata)	Rice grains	Akshata (turmeric-tinged rice)	Ubiquitous in aarti and blessings.

Emic logics, counts, and substitutions

- **Counts:** Durvā is typically offered in counts of 21 blades (or multiples). Patrī may be offered as a set of 21 species; when unavailable, practitioners substitute botanically related or symbolically equivalent leaves .
- **Color and rasa:** Red flowers (hibiscus) signal śakti; bitter leaves (neem) signal cleansing; fragrant flowers (mogra, parijat) signal auspiciousness.

- **Substitution rules:** Market availability, season, and ecology guide substitutions (e.g., *Prosopis cineraria* → *Senna siamea* leaves are **not** equivalent; better use *Albizia lebbeck* or *Acacia* spp. locally grown if shami is unavailable, as advised by local priests). Always prioritize cultivated or pruned material over wild harvesting.

Market and Supply-Chain Observations (Nashik City)

1. **Peak demand window:** 1–2 days before Ganesh sthāpana and the first 3–5 days after installation; fresh patrī bundles and flower garlands sell out by early morning.

2. **Source geographies:** Zendu (marigold) largely from peri-urban farms; hibiscus from home gardens/vendors; lotus from licensed pond cultivators or imports from neighboring districts.

3. **Packaging concerns:** Plastic thread and thermocol in garlands persist; natural fiber twine and leaf plates should be promoted.

4. **Price volatility:** Lotus and mogra show the highest price spikes; introducing community gardens and temple nurseries could stabilize supply.

Conservation and Sustainability

- **Do-No-Harm Harvesting:** Take leaves from pruned branches; avoid ring-barking and uprooting shrubs like *Calotropis*.

- **Cultivation over wild collection:** Encourage housing societies, schools, and temples to maintain patrī gardens (Ficus saplings, shami, nirgundi, aghāda, karanj, hibiscus, marigold).

- **Waste reduction:** Replace plastic décor with banana/mango leaf torans; compost spent flowers and durvā; create post-festival compost pits at pandals.

- **Visarjan ecology:** Promote clay (śādu) idols and designated immersion tanks; recover and compost floral offerings; avoid synthetic dyes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The ethnobotanical traditions of Ganesh Chaturthi in Nashik highlight a unique interweaving of domesticated ornamentals, wild shrubs, and sacred trees, making the festival both a devotional and ecological practice. The ritual use of patrī, pushpa, and sahāyaka plants connects urban devotees with semi-wild landscapes, while the symbolic emphasis on the number 21 reflects cultural values of completeness and auspiciousness. Substitution practices ensure ritual continuity despite ecological or market limitations; however, over-reliance on a few species (e.g., marigold, lotus) risks narrowing cultural diversity and intensifying ecological pressure.

To balance devotion with conservation, community-based initiatives are essential. Establishing patrī gardens through neighborhood nurseries can provide sustainable supplies of key species like shami, hibiscus, ficus, and nirgundi. Vendors and suppliers can be encouraged to follow an ethical code of practice, emphasizing pruning rather than destructive harvesting, eliminating plastic packaging, and maintaining fair pricing. Temple-based composting hubs can recycle flowers and leaves into vermicompost, reducing waste and benefiting urban gardens. Education kits—including bilingual field cards and digital tools—along with citizen science projects documenting plant diversity during the festival, can promote awareness and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Ultimately, Ganesh Chaturthi in Nashik represents more than a religious celebration; it is an ecological and cultural dialogue that binds communities to their biocultural heritage. By documenting ritual plants, acknowledging practitioner wisdom, and implementing simple yet practical sustainability measures, the festival can continue to thrive as a model of harmony between faith and biodiversity. Collaborative efforts among botanists, priests, vendors, municipal bodies, and devotees will be key to ensuring that both cultural vitality and plant diversity flourish together.

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