

Shaitan among us

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The four large trees in Lawrence Gardens of Lahore have nothing devilish about them. Then, why are they called shaitan?

By Sarah Humayun

Alstonia Scholaris is the botanical name, and *shaitan* is the common one. We are speaking of the four large trees right opposite the Quaid-e-Azam Library in Lahore's Lawrence Gardens. They are planted in what is called the bandstand by the gardeners — because in the *angrezi* days, when the library was the gymkhana, a police band used to play there in the evenings.

They are planted in a rough circle, and look, in spite of the suggestive name, rather innocuous. The age, the gardeners estimate, is probably from 60-70



Under the shadow of shaitan: Relaxing in the Gardens. Photos: Rahat Dar.

years. Alam Khan, the head gardener, can say with certainty that they were there 30 years ago, "along with the *angrezi* band". The thing that intrigues one is that there seems to be no link between the two — the common and the botanical name — cryptically placed side by side. This begs answers.

Nor can the gardeners be very helpful. It is not the first time someone has harried them for an explanation, and their answer is, they have not named it. "Somebody or the other named it, wherever it is they sit and think up names, and we just took the name as it was," says one.

Which is true enough. After all, names don't explain themselves when taken out of context, and there is nothing to suggest, as it is and where it is, that the tree has anything devilish about it. There is only the name to hint that it has, or had, a dark side.

And the explanation is that the two are not related. The name *Alstonia* comes from Prof. Alston of Edinburgh, who presumably introduced the species

to western nomenclature, and the other name, the interesting one, *Shaitan*, comes from western India. In Bengal it is called *Chittim*, which means the same thing. According to folklore, the tree is the abode of evil spirits. *Scholaris*, however, is derived primarily from its commercial use — ironically enough, for what might be called a non-commercial purpose. Its wood is soft and used as timber for blackboards — hence *Alstonia Scholaris*.

The tree is said to possess magical powers. Magical powers, in our up-to-date vocabulary, might simply mean medicinal powers. Of these it possesses a few. It's used in treating Malaria; also in homeopathic medicine. It's use in medicine for intestinal diseases is perhaps best known — for diarrhoea, dysentery and intermittent fever. It is also an aphrodisiac — information gleaned predictably enough from a wiccan website. The sap of the bark and leaves may have toxic effects. Was it, then, someone hard bitten by the tree who first called it *shaitan* in a moment of fear or exasperation?

It is indigenous to western India, Bengal, Ceylon, Borneo, and also Australia. If you are interested in the more practical aspects of growing the tree, you should know that it can reach a height of up to 20 metres and can spread to about 10 metres. It flowers between October to December, and the flowers are scented. Its favourite soils are deep, and it thrives in sandy coasts where the roots reach the water-table. It is tolerant to droughts.

The matter of the name was then, partly, cleared up. The two names are not connected, and are not mutually explanatory, because, of course, the namers had different associations with the tree.

Going through some articles about the indigenous names of trees and their associations, one found, not surprisingly, writers longing for a time and an age when people knew the names of trees and plants. They searched for reasons for their names, and their associations, in the normal course of things. But a return to this state of affairs, if indeed it would be a return, is not what

we speak of when we talk about 'environmental issues'. Presumably to live on good terms with nature would be to live with nature, side by side, as a normal part of one's environment; neither as friend nor as enemy, but sometimes one and sometimes the other. But not, as it were, a slave, with whom one might be neither a friend nor an enemy.

If this is possible one hardly knows, though we might make efforts from time to time to reacquaint ourselves with nature and things natural. But the 'issues' of the environment have more to do with the loss of the permanence and reliability of the natural world, which followed its set courses, and even catastrophes which occurred as inevitable and necessary to human beings. The natural world seems to us now vulnerable to human whim — whereas the processes and progresses of human beings seem necessary and inevitable. And it is the question of whether this attitude is compatible with the life on the planet as a whole that raises grave doubts.