

### *Acacia nilotica*

[Synonyms : *Acacia adansonii*, *Acacia arabica*, *Acacia nilotica* var. *adansonii*, *Acacia scorpioides*, *Acacia vera*, *Mimosa arabica*, *Mimosa nilotica*, *Mimosa scorpioides*]

**BABUL** (English and Hindi) is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to northern and eastern tropical Africa it has yellow or white flowers.

It is also known as Acacia bark, *Babbula* (Sanskrit), *Babla* (Bengali), Babul acacia, Babul bark, *Baval* (Gujarati), Black babool, Egyptian mimosa, Egyptian thorn, Gambia pods, Gum acacia, Gum arabic, Indian gum, *Karuvel* (Tamil), Kikar of India, *Mgunga* (East African), *Nallatumma* (Telugu), Nile acacia, Prickly acacia, Red-heat, *Sant* (Arabic), Sant pods, Scented thorn, Shittim wood, *Shōk-ash-sham* (Arabic), Sunewood, Sweet smell, Thorn, and Thorny acacia.

The resin (which can be a poor substitute for gum arabic (*Acacia senegal*) as it can often be coloured with tannin) is extracted from the bark. The gum from the stem which is released in tears is known locally as Amrad, Amrawatti or Brown Barbary gum.

*Nilotica* means ‘of or from the Nile valley’.

Babul was familiar to the ancient Egyptians. They ate the fragrant, grey or black fruit pods known as Gambia pods or Sant pods. Young shoots have also been eaten as a vegetable, while the blackish-brown seeds have been fermented (with dates, *Phoenix dactylifera*) to produce various alcoholic drinks, including rum. The seed kernels, roasted, have also provided a food flavouring.

Camels, sheep and goats have been fed on the feathery dark bluish-green leaflets and the flattened, wrinkled fruit pods (particularly in Sudan where babul is believed to enhance animal milk). The seeds themselves are considered to be an important cattle food.

The leaves have been used to make an ink. In India the fruit pods have also yielded a dyeing ingredient although alone the colour they would produce would be weak.

Young bark has offered a source of fibre not least for paper pulp. The inner bark (like the fruit pods) can yield a dye of varying shades of brown – but it is in greatest demand today locally for tanning particularly for goat hide.

The gum extracted from the bark is considered today to be a poorer quality alternative because it can be discoloured with tannin to gum arabic (*Acacia senegal*) although it can still be used for making confectionery, candles, matches, inks and paints. It has also been used for sizing silk and cotton as well as in the processes for printing and dyeing calico.

In India this very hard, heavy wood is an extremely important source of charcoal and fuel. As fuel it is used there by small industries, and by trains and river steamers. Babul wood has also been employed (even in ancient Egypt) for making agricultural equipment especially cart wheels, and for boats and rice-pounders. In more recent times it has been used for sugar and oil presses, oars, houses, furniture and railway sleepers. It should be mentioned perhaps that its use for building and cabinetmaking in India is most common in the north-western areas as many people in central India believe the wood when used for these purposes will bring ill fortune.

Locally twigs have been used to clean teeth.

African men of the Maasai tribe are said to have got drunk on a decoction of the bark and root which they not only believed would bolster courage (a nerve stimulant) but could also be

an aphrodisiac and cure for impotence. In contrast the Zulus are believed to take the bark still to ease coughs. In Tonga the root is said to be used locally to treat tuberculosis. Like many of its other close relatives babul can be an invasive plant. Its introduction to South Africa is regretted by some authorities who now view it as a weed. Then in Australia (where it is also not a native) its introduction there is having unfortunate results as in some areas it is changing grassland into shrubland. Medicinally, the bark or gum are said to have been used for treating an amazing range of problems, including tumors, cancer, gallbladder disorders, haemorrhages, piles, skin and eye ailments, smallpox, tuberculosis, some venereal diseases, coughs, leprosy, diarrhoea and dysentery.