

## Natural disasters

No one has control over natural disasters. It tests our capability to cope, every time it occurs on earth. We cannot stop natural disasters from happening, but we can prepare ourselves. We feel proud of our scientific and technological excellence and it is obvious that we have made an impact in the world of S&T. Then, why should India not be able to prepare herself well before a disaster hits? This is a question we must ask ourselves.

Every time a disaster strikes the magnitude of response from all sections of society is impeccable. But the question is, do we wish to remain as 'reactive' all the time or

should we also become 'proactive'? Out of my personal experience of working in Gujarat earthquake relief programme, I can say that, indeed, sheer ignorance about the nature of a disaster makes people more vulnerable to it. Education and social awareness programmes at every level are a must.

It should not take 1000 deaths in developing countries to make the same impact as one death in a developed country. Like a smoke or fire alarm system, a system needs to be around us everywhere to trigger the alarm for predetermined actions, which would be carried out in a strict manner to save life, property, etc. under any disaster

situation. This demands good training and skilled manpower.

Last but not the least, bringing new scientific approaches and technologies, strengthening the existing ones, and more importantly, injecting a right attitude from the top to the ground level could give us a safer place to live.

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## Saraca asoka

This is regarding the research article published by Arvind *et al.*<sup>1</sup>, with cover-page photographs of some red-listed species of India. It is a good attempt in directing conservation efforts. However, the first photograph, *Saraca asoka* does not match with the image. I have a doubt about this image and would like to give some clarification on this important medicinal plant. The photograph looks more like a shrub of the Rubiaceae family than a Caesalpinaceae tree. The Ashok (Sanskrit for anti-suffering) tree is a symbol of longevity. It grows in the central and eastern Himalayas as well as in the west coast of India. Its bright orange flowers bloom in abundance during spring. It occurs naturally as a forest tree, often at the edges of streams. Initially slow to establish, it eventually develops into a tree with a compact canopy of pinnate leaves composed of lance-shaped leaflets. New foliage is soft, limp and pale green to light pink, becoming stiffer and deeper green as it matures.

Mythological stories reveal that Sita is said to have sat under this tree while being held captive by Ravana. Hence the

tree is also called the Sita Ashok, and is not considered auspicious around Hindu homes, especially those homes where there are daughters. However, it is also sacred to Kama Deva, the God of Love, and its brilliant flowers provide delicately perfumed temple decorations.

According to a survey<sup>2</sup>, about 34% of Indian women suffer from reproductive health problems related to uterine bleeding. This plant is a source of the 'wonder medicine' Ashokarista used to treat such ailments.

1. Arvind, N. A., *Curr. Sci.*, 2005, **88**, 258-265.
2. Batliwala *et al.*, *Status of Rural Women in Karnataka*, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, 1998, p. 128.

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Although I am a muscle biologist, I would like to think of myself as an amateur botanist too. The first picture on the cover page of the 25 January 2005 issue of *Current Science*, despite the poor resolution, looked like the *Ixora* species to me and not *Saraca asoka* as is mentioned in the legend on the second page. I am aware that the flowers of the two are incredibly similar. However on the basis of three notable differences, it does not look like the one that is mentioned. The differences being: (i) *Ixora* buds look pointy, while *S. asoka* are blunt; (ii) *Ixora* flowers have a pointed tip, *S. asoka* are rounded; (iii) Whiskery anthers droop out in *S. asoka*, that are visibly absent in *Ixora*.

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See *Current Science*, 2005, **88**, 725 for an erratum on this subject.

—Editor

## Lymphatic filariasis eradication programme

The eight states in the Northeast, i.e. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and Sikkim, have a tropical climate with luxuriant moist and deciduous rainforest.

This environmental condition is ideal for breeding mosquitoes, leading to epidemics like malaria, lymphatic filariasis (LF), Japanese encephalitis and other mosquito-borne diseases. Low socio-economic con-

ditions, difficult terrain, limited health facilities coupled with poor surface communication specially during long monsoon periods, pose major challenges in providing health services.