

### THREE IMPORTANT VEDIC GRASSES

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(Received 4 May 1987)

During the times *R̥gveda* (*RV*) was being finally compiled *i.e.* about 2000 B.C., the Aryans were in India but had remained pastoral people or nomads. Their worship consisted of sacrifices to the gods they had conceived, and to perform sacrifices they used to construct an altar, or *Vedi*, of grass. The altar was a bundle of grass cut at either end and the bundle was given the shape of a rectangular stool. Marshall<sup>1</sup> illustrates a bundle of *Soma* plant which is ephedra, and two bundles of grass which the grass cutter Swastika had brought as offering to Buddha. Both these pictures have been reproduced and discussed by me in an earlier article.<sup>2</sup> The same grass was used to cover the *Vedi* on which objects of sacrifice were placed. At the same time it was spread on the ground around the altar for the persons offering sacrifice to sit upon. It was further imagined that the gods to whom the sacrifices were offered were also present during the sacrifice and took their seats on the grass. Such was the role played by the grass, and it was imperative to make it sacred. *R̥gveda* speaks of "sacred grass" which we must interpret as being *Desmostachya bipinnata*. In Sanskrit and Hindi it is called *Kuśa*. Its former scientific name was *Eragrostis cynosuroides*.

Majundar<sup>3</sup> had dealt with "Vedic Plants" and as item 33 mentions *Darbha* with two varieties :

1. *Kharā-darbha* : *Eragrostis cynosuroides*,
2. *Mṛdu-darbha* : *Eragrostis tenella* or *ciliaris*.

Later writers have not taken any note of Majundar's recording of these two species of grass.

Here we may consult *RV*, 1. 191.3. which reads "Sara grass, *Darbha*, *Kushara*, and *Sairyā*, *Munja*, *Viranda*, where all these creatures (snakes and other vermins) dwell unseen".

There is no further mention of *Darbha* in the whole of *R̥gveda* nor of the word *Kuśa* or *Kuśara*. We however, get the impression on reading *RV* that

where "sacred grass" is mentioned it is generally *Kuśa* or *Darbha*, when *Kuśa* is *Desmostachya bipinnata*

*Atharvaveda* was compiled in about 1500 B.C. It refers to many medicinal plants as also to their use as charms. Apart from these there are many references to amulets. Here *Darbha* is also dealt with and is considered next to the *Soma* plant in importance. AV, XIX.32.7 states *Darbha* hath sprung from gods stationed in heaven. With this have I won many men and may I win them still." AV, XI.6.15 reads "To the five kingdoms of the plants which *Soma* rules as lord we speak : *Darbha*, hemp, barley, mighty power : any of these deliver us from woe." With such importance attached to a grass it is best interpreted that *Darbha* is *Desmostachya bipinnata*. AV, XIX.28.1. reads "on thee I bind this amulet for lengthened life and brilliancy, the rival-quelling *Darbha* grass that burns the spirit of foe." AV, XIX.22.1 says "Let this name *Darbha* guard us from all quarters, this god-like amulet shall with life endow us." This further confirms that *Darbha* is *Desmostachya bipinnata*.

#### DESMOSTACHYA BIPINNATA

It may be of interest to glance through some more statements in the *Atharvaveda*.

AV, XIX.33.2 "Driving away foes and casting them beneath me, mount with the strength of the mighty ones, O *Darbha*".

AV, XIX.33.4. "The energy of gods and mighty power I bind this (amulet) on thee for long life and welfare."

AV, VI.43.2. "This plant that hath abundant roots spreads to the places where waters meet. Soother of anger is the name of *Darbha* grass that springs from earth." (Of all the three grasses concerned here *D. bipinnata* alone goes upto 5 feet underground to reach subsoil water.)

AV, VIII.7.2. "The father of these herbs was heaven, their mother earth, the sea was their root."

AV, VIII.7.20. "*Aśvattha*, *Darbha*, King of plants is *Soma*, deathless sacrifice... the sons of heaven who never die."

(Here again, the most hardy and drought resistant grass would be *D. bipinnata*. It means *Dabha* is *D. bipinnata*)



Fig 1. Desmostachya bipinnata

Considering the hardness of the grass Griffith<sup>4</sup> comments on stanza IX.28.1. of AV which says "on thee I bind this amulet for lengthening life and brilliancy. The rival-quelling *Darbha* grass that burns the spirit of a foe." He remarks— "*Darbha* grass : sacrificial grass used for strewing the ground and for other purposes in religious ceremonies. In AV,II.7, VI.43, and VIII.7.20 "*Darbha* is identified with *Soma* as the King of Plants." This surely establishes that *Darbha* is *D. bipinnata*. Griffith has been quoted above from vol.2, p.285 of his translation of AV. But in vol.1, p.49 he states "This plant *Darbha* or *Kuśa* grass *Poa cynosuroides* (= *D. bipinnata*) is much used in sacrificial ceremonies." AV,II.7.3 says "spread on the surface of the earth, downward from heaven thy root deepens : With this that hath a thousand joints keep thou as safe on every side." Griffith comments that "O Plant, *Darbha*, thy root is in heaven" (AV,XIX.32.3.) refers to its divine origin. And of thousand joints Griffith says "*Darbha* is a grass that spreads rapidly and continuously re-roots itself. The multiplicity of joints or roots indicates the far-reaching power of the plant." As cited above, Griffith equates *Darbha* as *Kuśa* as *D. bipinnata* (Griffith, Vol.1, p.49).

Botanically it has been found that the roots of *D. bipinnata* can go as deep as 5 feet until they find subsoil water. It makes the hardiest grass we know.

In *Rgveda*, I.191.3 there is the term *Kuśara*, but not the specific word *Kuśa*. This occurs only once in AV, XX.131 9-10 : "Lover of *Kuśa* grass unploughed ! Fat is not reckoned in the hoof." Griffith offers no comments on *Kuśa* in this stanza, but every where else he equates *Darbha* to *Kuśa* grass. We have to note that in *Rgveda* itself there are the two names of grasses, *Darbha* and *Kuśara*. And Majumdar recognizes two varieties as *Kharā-darbha* and *Mṛdu-darbha*, which may suggest that *Darbha* is the name of the former variety and *Kuśa* of the latter. A layman does not critically differentiate between allied grasses and as a result *Kuśa* and *Darbha* have become synonyms.

However/Prof. P.V. Sharma<sup>5</sup> of Varanasi has tried to differentiate the grasses, *Darbha* and *Kuśa*. He writes to the effect that what is considered as *Darbha* are two distinct grasses. This is what Majumdar had already done. In *Rgveda* one was called *Darbha* and the other *Kuśara*. He maintains that "in *Rgveda*, *Kuśa* is not found. In RV, 1.191.3 the word *Kuśara* mentioned with *Darbha* and other grasses is *kuśa* but is interpreted wrongly by Sāyana who takes *Kuśa* by *Darbha*, like other medieval authors. In early texts of *Āyurveda* too they are quite separate entities. Caraka (SO.4) mentions *Kuśa* and *Darbha* separately in *stanya janana* galactagogue and *mūtra virecniyal* (diuretic) groups. Suśruta also mentions finally in Timepancewala (roots of five grasses) group. It is during the medieval period that these were confused as one and treated as synonyms." When we compare the classification of Sharma with that of Majumdar we have *Kuśa*=*Kharādarbha*=*Desmostachya bipinnata*, according to both, but *Darbha*=*Mṛdudarbha*=*Eragrostis ciliaris* according to Majumdar,

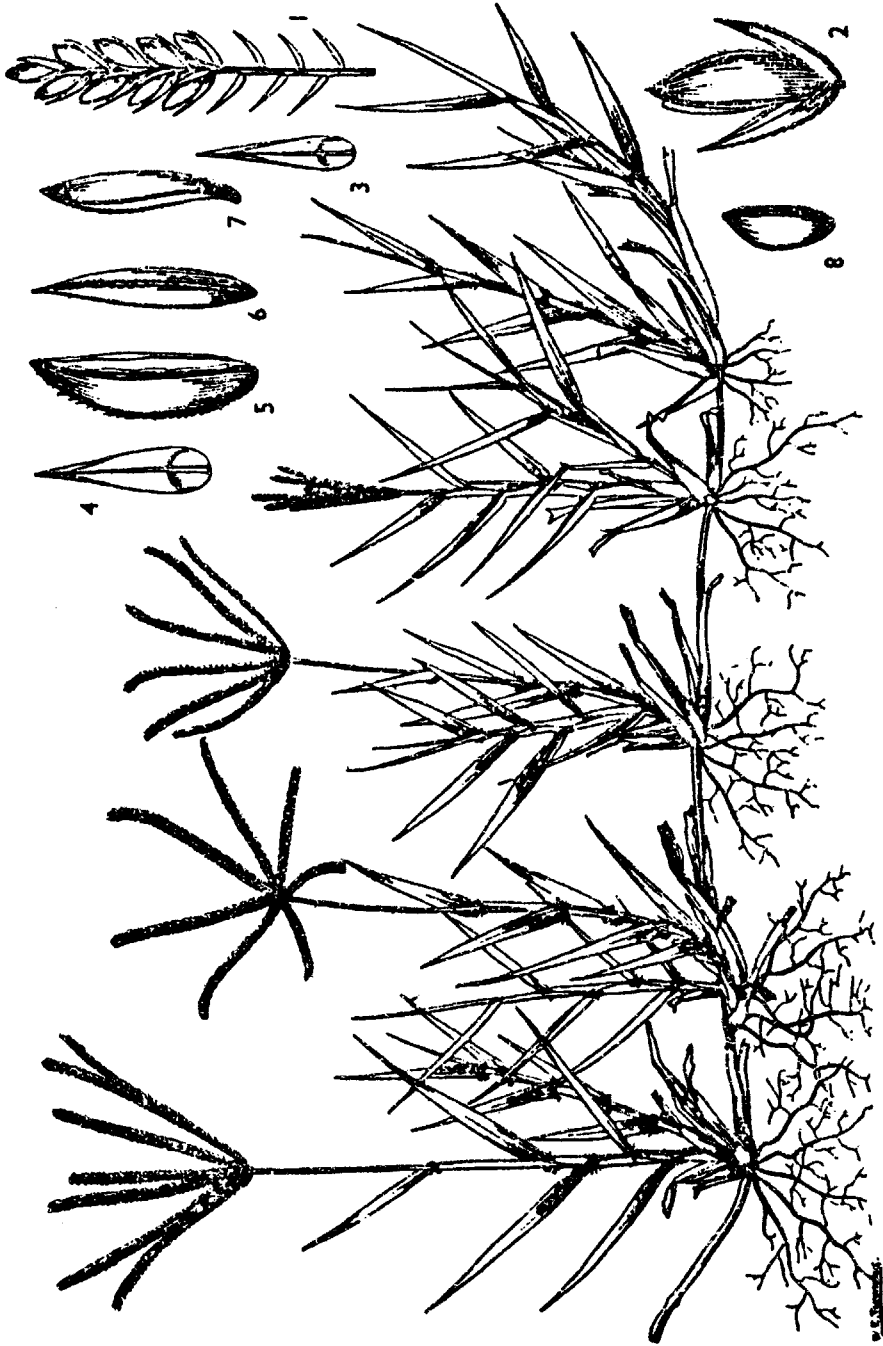


Fig 2. *Cynodon dactylon* (Linn.) Pers.

Plant  $\times 1$ . 1. portion of spike with persistent lower glumes  $\times 2$ ; 2. spikelet;  
 3. lower glume; 4. upper glume; 5 and 6, side and back views of lemma; 7. palea;  
 8. grain; all  $\times 8$ .

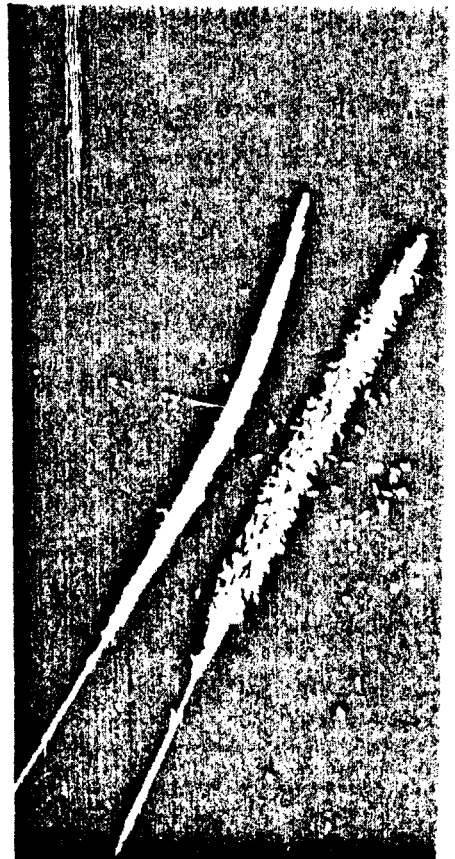
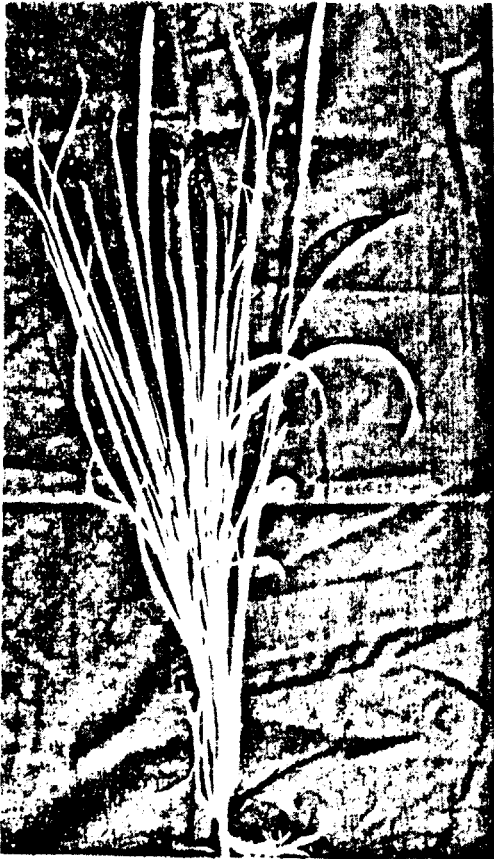


Fig 3. *Imperata cylindrica*

but *Imperata cylindrica* according to Sharma. What Majumdar considers as two species, Sharma considers as two different genera.

*Dūrvā* grass is mentioned in *RV*, X.134.5 : "Let all malevolence pass away from us like the threads of *Dūrvā* grass." Griffith observes that "*Dūrvā* grass, *Panicum dactylon*, a species of bent grass whose filaments stretch horizontally away from the stem." *RV*, X.142.8 reads "On thy way hitherward and hence let flowery *Dūrvā* grass spring up." Griffith, by way of comment, refers to *AV*, VI.106, where we read "let flowery *Dūrvā* grass grow up about thine exit and approach. There let a spring of water rise." Griffith quotes from Roxburgh that "*Dūrvā* grass, *Panicum dactylon* is a creeping grass with flower bearing branches erect. It is by far the most common and useful grass in India. It grows every where abundantly and flowers all the year. In Hindusthani it is called Dhh." *Dūrvā* is called *Dub* and *Darbha* and *Kuśa* are called *Dabh* and *Kuśa* in Hindustani.

I have been able to obtain illustrations of all the three grasses and these are reproduced here. Fig. 1 is of *Desmostachya bipinnata*. This is also found in Saudi Arabia and its inflorescence has been illustrated by Migahid<sup>6</sup> (vol.2, pl.731). Fig. 2 is of *Cynodon dactylon* as illustrated by Bor (1973 ; Fig. 52). It shows how the grass spreads horizontally. Fig. 3 is of *imperata cylindrica* as given by Migahid (pl. 756).

The three grasses would be as follows :

Botanical name	Sanskrit	Vernacular
1. <i>Desmostachya bipinnata</i>	Kusa	Kuśa
2. <i>Imperata cylindrica</i>	Darbha	Dabh
3. <i>Panicun dactylon</i>	Durva	Dub

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is most grateful to Prof. P.V. Sharma of Varanasi for his deep interest and kind help in this work.

#### REFERENCES AND NOTES

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- <sup>5</sup> Sharma, P.V., 1986, Private communication.
- <sup>6</sup> Migahid, Ahmad Mohammad, *Flora of Saudi Arabia*, Vol.2, Ryadh, 1978.