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### The Captivating Coral Tree

The changing seasons of the year never fail to astound me. As winter gasps its way into oblivion, the tender shoots of spring sprout up everywhere. A bevy of activity welcomes the warm weather. Insect life abounds, and insectivorous birds have a gala time, twittering (not that Twitter, you geeks!) their way excitedly, feeding on the tasty morsels on offer. Buzzing bees and nectar-seeking birds indulge in some friendly competition, searching out flowers in bloom to gorge on nectar.



Amazingly, even sedate trees compete for the attention of pollinating insects and birds. Three different deciduous trees shed their leaves at the same time, and adorn themselves with gloriously coloured red flowers. The Red Silk Cotton Tree *Bombax ceiba*, towers amongst the other trees, with juicy red flowers that embellish its branches. The Flame of the Forest *Butea monosperma* is equally dashing, with its flame-red flowers making a compelling statement. The smallest tree, the Indian Coral Tree *Erythrina variegata* is not daunted by the size of its peers. In fact, in an attempt to

outdo its larger rivals, the Coral Tree often flowers when it is still quite small and growing. The trio of flowering trees spectacularly splash the azure blue sky with flame red colours, sensing the Festival of Colours, Holi, is just round the corner. Its amazing how nature reflects the moods of changing seasons!

The Indian Coral Tree is a mid-sized tree, growing to no more than 20 meters in height. It has large, trifoliate, heart-shaped leaves and greenish-grey bark, often pocked with black thorns, which protect the young plant from foraging cattle. Found throughout Indian plains, foothills and even beaches, dotting many gardens, it is largely leafless between January and March. Shorn of its leaves, looking lonely and forlorn, the tree's flowers begin to bloom, probably lightening up its own mood! The flowers of the Coral Tree form a conical inflorescence at the end of a branch. Each of the crimson coloured florets are upwardly curved, and are shaped like the claw of the tiger. In fact, the tree is also known as the Tiger's Claw Tree. As the tree sheds its flowers, large black, foot-long seed pods with egg-shaped seeds develop, hoping to transmit its seeds far and wide.

Standing under the the tree one morning, I watched furtively, as a flurry of activity ensued. Ubiquitous honey bees hovered over the luscious red flowers, parting the petals, to devour the flower's nectar. A pair of bright yellow birds, the Oriental White-eyes, popped onto the tree. The birds fed excitedly on the red flowers, often upending themselves, searching for the right angle to sip at the tasty nectar. Tweeting with pleasure, Crimson and Purple Sunbirds tucked into the flowers with their curved beaks, sucking out nectar from the base of the flowers, where no other birds can reach. A disturbed pair of Red-vented Bulbuls gave me baleful looks. "Why cannot you mind your own business? How would you feel if someone peered at you when you sat down for your breakfast? Not only peered at you, but also took some pictures on the sly. Stop behaving like paparazzi.

Called *Pangara* in Hindi, folklore from the Puranas state that it flowers in Indra's garden and that Rukmani and Satyabhama quarreled over *Pangara* flowers, which had actually been stolen by Lord Krishna from the garden!

The Indian Coral Tree is not just another pretty face! It has its uses, and its leaves are often used to prepare curry. Its soft bark is used to make ornaments. Drying its flowers in the shade, you can make a handy red *gulal* (coloured powder) which can be used during the Holi festival.

Eventually the scolding of the bulbuls finally got through the duffer that was me and I moved away from the tree, allowing the bulbuls to resume feeding. As I walked away, the earth below me was strewn with the fallen red petals of the Indian Coral Tree, as though laying out a red carpet for all nature lovers!

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