



About the Book and the Author

# Sacred Plants of India

NANDITHA KRISHNA AND M AMIRTHALINGAM

Hinduism accords a divine status to trees and plants. Myths, epics and rituals of worship are built around them.

It is well known that trees improve water quality and help recharging of ground water supply. Many trees and plants have edible leaves rich in vitamins and other nutrients. Trees impact on our daily lives in so many ways even in the midst of busy concrete city centres.

There is a reference in the *Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva*, that those who want better future should plant good trees around lakes and tanks used by the public, and raise them like sons.

There are references in the *Siva Purana* and the *Padma Purana*, among others, about the spiritual significance of various plants and trees.

**Sacred Plants of India** is a well-researched book on tree worship in India, written by two respected and experienced professionals in the field, Nandita Krishna and M. Amrithalingam. While the former is Director of the C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar Foundation, Chennai, the latter is a botanist and environmental education officer at the C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre. They have written several research papers and articles on the environmental, religious and spiritual aspects of plants and trees.

The book, **Sacred Plants of India**, (296 pages, price Rs.399) is published by the Penguin Group.

**Tattvāloka** presents in the following pages edited extracts from the first two sections of the book. The book has chapters on each of the sacred plants/trees and their individual significance.



# SACRED PLANTS OF INDIA

Tree worship is inherent in all religions emanating from India. The relationship between the tree and its patron deity is an intricate web.

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## Ecological Heritage

**S**acred trees form an important part of the ecological heritage of India. Most temples, towns, and villages are associated with trees. Some plants are sacred to the individual deity; others, to the place. Sometimes, the tree is an integral or even larger part of the sanctity of the shrine; towns, cities and dynasties have been named after sacred trees.

Worship of plants is an ancient

phenomenon in India, probably the oldest form of worship. Sanctification of plants reveals the socio-economic and health concerns of the ancient peoples, their knowledge of environment and its conservation.

Association of a single tree with a sacred *sthala* or *sthan* is reflected in the *chaitya vriksha* and *sthala vriksha* (explained below) of literature and society.

The earliest temples were

little more than icons placed under trees. Later, the tree and the image were enclosed by a fence made of wood, followed even later by stone. The temple was a later construction. Numerous references are made in literature to trees as abodes of gods. As the open-air shrine beneath the tree was replaced by a shrine or temple for the deity, the tree became the *sthala vriksha* of the temple.

Trees were revered for any of the four primary reasons: For

their medicinal qualities, such as the neem and Tulsi; for their economic value, such as the Alexandrian laurel which was used to build catamarans and ships off the Coromandal coast; for their ecological importance, such as the mangrove in the famous Siva *kshetra*, Chidambaram in south India; and for their socio-cultural role, such as the banyan, which served as the meeting place of the Bania or business community.

## Vedic References

Plant worship is probably the oldest form of religion, because of the sheer magnificence and antiquity of huge trees. The *Rg Veda* (X.97) says that plants are 'those that grew in old times ... much earlier than even the shining ones (*devas*)... and are different from many different places ...'

Trees were called *vanaspati* (lord of the forest) and invoked as deities along with the waters and mountains. The *Rg Veda* (X.146) invokes the forest as *Aranyani*, a jungle deity.

The plants of the *Rg Veda* situate the *Veda* in the sub-tropical plains of India and Pakistan.

Soma is the most important plant in the *Rg Veda*. Mandala IX

of the *Rg Veda* is called the *Soma mandala*, devoted to the ritual of *Soma pavamana* or 'purification of Soma', and six hymns in other *mandalas* are devoted to its praise. Soma was a ritual drink extracted from a plant. Where did the Soma plant grow? According to the *Mahabharata*, it grew on Mujavant, a mountain located in the Himalayas. The plant had long stalks and was yellow in colour.

In the *Vedic* period, all of nature was, in some sense, divine, part of an indivisible life force uniting the world of humans, animals, and vegetables. Besides trees, grasses and herbs were also held sacred.

Trees, says the *Rg Veda*, are the homes and mansions of the gods.

The udumbara (cluster fig) was used for making the *yupa* (sacrificial pole), udumbara and khadira for making the *sruva* (ladle), *nyagrodha* for making the *chamasa* (sacrificial bowl), and *bilva* for its fruit and for making the *yupa* for the sacrifice.

Varuna is the root of the Tree of Life, the source of all creation, a great *yaksha* reclining in *tapas* (meditation) on the waters from where a tree springs from his navel (*Atharva Veda*). In the *Yajur Veda*, this quality is inherited by Prajapati. The tree is the *asvatta* but later the Creator was seated on the lotus, which issued from Narayana's navel.

The pipal was held in great esteem in the Vedic period. A tree of huge dimensions, it was symbolic of the cosmos and even of the *Brahman*.

The imperishable pipal was later called the *akshaya vata*, the

eternal tree. The pipal tree was the basis of a profound metaphysical doctrine in the *Rg Vedic* and later *Vedic* literature.

The *Rg Veda* says that plants personify the divine and trees are the *Vanapati* or lords of the forest, self-regenerating and eternal.

The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* says that a tree of huge dimensions filling the space around it with its numerous branches and foliage, with a lofty trunk and many stems rising high in the sky, was the symbol of the Cosmic Tree or *Brahman*.

According to the *Chandogya Upanishad*, the Cosmic Tree symbolises life while the *Taittiriya Brahmana* equates *Brahma* with the forest and the tree: *Brahma tad vanam, Brahma sa vriksha asa* (*Brahma* is the forest, *Brahma* is the tree).

## Trees in Epics

There are sacred trees for each *yuga*. The sandalwood tree (*Santalum album*) is the sacred tree of the *Satya* or *Krita Yuga*; *champak* (*Michelia champaka*) of the *Treta Yuga*; the capper bush (*Cleome fruticosa*) of the *Dvapara Yuga*; and the jackfruit tree of the *Kali Yuga*.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* make several references to the worship of sacred plants and trees. It is evident that the *Ramayana* is not the product of poet Valmiki's imagination. His botanical information, like his geography, is authentic.

Valmiki points out a plant's geography and distribution and gives ethnic information of his times. Four sentiments dominate the forest environment: *Shanta* (calm), *madhura* (sweetness), *raudra* (anger), and *vibhatsa* (disgust). The thick forests include Naimisharanya, Chitrakuta and Dandakaranya, Panchavati, Kishkinda, and Ashoka Vana.

According to the *Ramayana*, there were several types of sacred trees. The *rathya vriksha* or roadside trees and the *devata nishthana vrikshas* or abodes of deities were further divided into the *yaksha chaitya* (yaksha's tree shrine) and *chaitya vriksha* (tree shrine). There were also the *chaturpatha varthi vriksha* (tree at the junction of crossroads with revetments around its trunk) and *smashana vriksha* (tree grown on the cremation grounds).

Sita, on her way to the forest, worshipped and circumambulated a large banyan tree on the banks of river Kalindi, entreating it to enable her husband to fulfil his vow. The forest of Dandaka, where Rama, Lakshmana and Sita lived, and the grove of Ashoka trees where Sita was imprisoned in Lanka are still sacred.

When Rama and Lakshmana were scouring the forest for Sita,

they came across a badari tree. They asked the tree whether it had seen Sita. The tree answered in the affirmative and pointed in the direction in which Sita had gone. Pleased, Rama blessed the tree and gave it a boon that it would never die.

In another incident, Rama came across Sabari, a poor tribal woman who was his great devotee. She tasted each and every badari fruit to see whether it was tasty before offering it to Rama. Since then, the fruit has been regarded as sacred and is included in religious ceremonies.

There were strict injunctions against the felling of trees



in Lanka. Ravana says that he had never cut down a fig tree in the month of Vaisakha (April-May), and so he could not understand why fate was cruel to him.

The *darbha* grass, cut in bunches and spread out as a seat with the ends pointing eastwards, was used for sacred purposes (*Ramayana*), while the grass was pointed in the opposite direction during the performance of the *shraaddha* or death ceremony. The fresh leaf blade, elongated and pointing with sapphire-like lustre, was used as a missile by Rama.

The story of the origin of *kusha* grass and its religious importance is reinforced after Sita's *bhumi praveshah*, when she entered the earth to leave this world. Sita prayed to her mother, the Earth, to take her back. The earth opened up. Her son, Kusha, ran forward to save his mother but could grasp only her hair. The hair turned to grass, and it was named after



Kusha, as he had tried to save her. Since then the *kusha* grass is held sacred and used in various rituals (*Uttara kanda* of the *Ramayana*).

The *Mahabharata* says that holy trees should not be injured as they are the abodes of *devas*, *yakshas*, *rakshasas*, and so on. The epic says that the *yaksha* is a *vrikshavasin* (tree dweller) and that trees have life. The *Mahabharata* also says that during the *maha pralaya* (great flood), sage Markandeya was wandering around the huge abyss of water when he saw

a child floating on the leaf of the banyan tree. The child identified himself as Narayana, the resting place of souls, the Creator and Destroyer of the Universe.

The popular image of the child, Krishna, floating on a banyan leaf in the ocean, was identified with Krishna and named *Vata-patra-sayi*, or 'he who rests on the banyan leaf'. The cult of Krishna furthered

the worship of trees. Krishna lived in a village surrounded by forests full of trees and told his friends to worship the beautiful trees that lived

for the benefit of others. Every part of the tree, he said, is useful and everyone who approaches a tree benefits from it.

## Puranic and Later Literature

The *Vamana Purana* identifies some plants with specific gods and goddesses.

The *Matsya Purana* and the *Padma Purana* describe a great tree plantation ceremony called the *vriksha mahotsava*. The *Matsya Purana* equates the planting of a tree with ten sons. In the *Narasimha Purana*, the tree is equated with Lord Brahma himself.

In the *Vishnu Sahasranamam* (thousand names of Vishnu), the cluster fig, pipal, ashoka, and banyan are some of the names of Vishnu, while Siva is conceived as a *yupa* made of *shami* wood. Parvati is *aparna* or leafless, suggesting that even the dry tree trunk bears shoots when associated with Goddess *Aparna*.

Finally, according to the *Vishnudharmottara*, each of the *Sapta Matrikas* (seven mothers) sits beneath a tree. The seven mothers and their trees are as follows:

Brahmani: *Palasha* (flame of the forest)

Vaishnavi: *Raja Vriksha* (royal tree; chirauli nut)

Indrani: *Kalpaka* (turmeric or Curcuma)

Chamunda: *Plaksha* (cluster fig)

Maheshwari: *Pundarika* (lotus)

Kaumari: *Plaksha* (cluster fig)

Varahi: *Kalpaka* (turmeric or Curcuma)

### Indus Civilisation

There are several examples of tree worship on the seals of the Indus Sarasvati civilisation. Of these, the sacred fig or pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) and the Indian mesquite or shami (*Prosopis spirigera*) are represented more frequently than other trees.

According to Buddhist scriptures, sacrifices were performed to *yakshas* or spirits of the trees. Even today, Hindus circumambulate the pipal seven times to the prayer *vriksha rajaya namah*.

### Trees in Buddhism

Buddhism and Jainism, being offshoots of the Vedic religion,



continued many of the earlier traditions. One of these was the sanctity of the tree, particularly the peepal. Each form of the Buddha and each of the Jaina Tirtankaras was associated with his own tree, under which he attained enlightenment. Plants and trees played an important role in Jainism.

In early Buddhist monuments, the Buddha (563-483 BCE) was never represented in human form but as his symbol, the tree. The tree is a substitute for the Buddha himself, as are other symbols like the *dharma chakra*, footsteps, and

so on. There are several scenes of common people, kings, queens, and Brahmanas worshipping the Buddha represented as a tree, mounted on a platform and festooned with garlands.

Four trees are associated with the enlightenment of the Buddha. He sat under a pipal on the banks of the Niranjana river for the first seven days, in the bliss of his enlightenment; then he arose and sat under a nyagrodha for another seven days, in the bliss of his illumination; then he sat beneath a muchalinda (Indian oak) for an-

other seven days, in the bliss of his calm; and, finally, he sat beneath a rajayatana (wild mango or *Buchanania latifolia*) for seven days, in the bliss of his emancipation.

The four trees are known as the Tree of Enlightenment, the Tree of the Goatherd, the Tree of Muchalinda, and the Tree of Emancipation, respectively. The Muchalinda was named after the serpent king who protected the Buddha from the storm that raged as he was meditating.

#### Ancient Tamil Literature

According to Tamil Sangam literature, different trees are associated with different gods. The banyan was believed to have some divine force in itself, because some god or the other would be pleased to take shelter in its shade. Siva is visualised as sitting under a banyan and expounding eternal truths to four disciples. Vishnu is also called *aalamara kadavul* (god of the banyan tree).

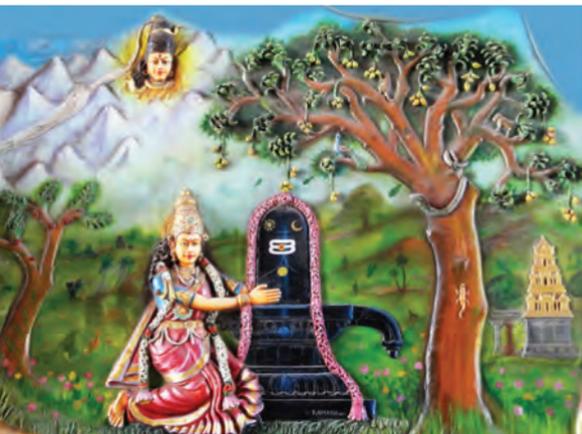
Siva, seated under the banyan and facing south is Dakshinamurti, and this name is mentioned in the epic, *Silappadikaaram*. Dakshinamurti is invariably seen on the walls of the Saiva temples of Tamil Nadu.

In the Jambukesvara temple near Tiruchi, the Siva *lingam* stands at the foot of the Indian black plum tree, enclosed by a wall, and constitutes the *garbhagriha* (sanctum).

At Vaidisvaran kovil, also in Tamil Nadu, the original lingam is still preserved beneath the neem tree, which has medicinal properties, suggesting that Siva was the god of medicine (*vaidyam*) and doctors (*vaidya*). This proves that the original temple was a mere deity beneath a tree, before later dynasties supplanted it with a huge lingam housed in a covered structure.



## Tree Legends



Every tree has a legend of its own. For example, the mango tree at Ekambaresvara temple in Kanchi is said to yield mangoes of different varieties, tastes, and sizes; thus it is worshipped as a divine embodiment. Goddess Parvati worshipped the Siva lingam beneath the mango tree.

There are sculptures of sacred trees in the temples of medieval Tamil Nadu, such as the seaside oak at the Meenakshi temple, Madurai, the Alexandrian laurel of Kapalisvara temple, Mylapore, Chennai, and the jackfruit tree at Courtallam in Tirunelveli district.

### **Yaksha and the Tree**

As early as the Indus-Sarasvati civilisation, there are indications of the worship of the `spirit of the

tree'. There are many scenes of a figure standing or sitting within a tree on the seals from this era. The tradition of the *yaksha* or *yakshi*--the spirit of the tree or his/her equivalent--obviously had very ancient roots.

The *Mahabharata* enumerates the sacred trees of various towns and tells us that every village had a sacred tree, each identified with a *yaksha*. The word,

*yaksha* occurs several times in the *Rg Veda*, *Atharva Veda*, *Upanishads* and *Brahmanas*. The word generally means `a magical being', something both terrible and wonderful.

The importance of the *yaksha* comes from the fact that worship of the *yaksha* living in the tree was as important as the worship of the tree itself. Trees were the natural abodes of the spirits, many of whom were identified by or named for the tree.

### **The Tree and the Snake**

Association of trees with snakes is also as old as Indian civilisation. It appears on Harappan seals: Two snakes flanking a tree, a naga-like figure guarding the *shami*,

and so on. Much later, in the Bharhut images of the Sunga period (2nd century ME), the Nagas--men and women with cobra hoods--worship symbols of the Buddha placed beneath the bodhi tree.

The pipal tree has been described as the Tree of Knowledge, the Tree of Life, the Tree of Eternal Life, and the Tree of Creation. By spreading its branches, it brings blessings to humankind. This tree is closely connected with fertility, which the serpent symbolises.

Where there is a pipal, there will also be a neem---so goes a popular saying--with the two often intertwined. A platform is built around them and one or more images of the snake installed on the platform and worshipped. This is believed to bless the worshipper with prosperity. Sometimes a Ganesa or Hanuman may also be installed with the snake stones and the place becomes a sacred prayer stop for passers-by.

## Special Trees

### *Kalpa Vriksha*

The *Kalpa Vriksha* is the wish-fulfilling tree of life, first mentioned in the *Rg Veda*. It was one of the gems that came out of the ocean during the *samudra manthan* (churning of the ocean), and Indra, king of the heavens, took it away to paradise. It is a very special tree that can bear any kind of fruit, which is why it is associated with different trees in different places. It is a symbol of life and prosperity, a focal point for one's spiritual quest.

There is a legend about the *Kalpa Vriksha* that was originally found in *Uttarakuru*. According to the *Bhishma parva* in the *Mahabharata*, the *siddhas* who lived in



*Uttarakuru*, worshipped the *kalpa vriksha*. Some branches produced streams of milk tasting like nectar and the flavour of all six *rasas*. Other branches produced clothes and ornaments, still others yielded men and women of great beauty and youth. It was a golden tree of life, with golden branches and fruit, and had to be worshipped properly.

The *kalpa vriksha*, also known as *kalpataru*, *kalpadruma*, and *kalpapaada*, is guarded by flying *kin-naras/kinnaris* (celestial musicians), (half-human half-bird), *apsaras*, and *gandharvas*. It is a popular motif in art and has even been adopted as an Islamic art motif.

### **Chaitya Vriksha-Sthala Vriksha**

When, how, and why the *chaitya vriksha* became the *sthala vriksha* is a matter of conjecture but there are a few clues. As the characteristics of the *yaksha* (protector) were absorbed by the tree, it became the protector of the town, village, or *sthala*. However, while *sthala vrikshas* abound all over the country, the *sthala purana* of each temple also has a legend linking the *vriksha* to the deity or the consort. Thus, the Alexandrian laurel and mango trees were the scenes where Devi performed penance to regain the

hand and heart of Siva in Mylapore and Kanchipuram, respectively in Tamil Nadu.

The *sthala vriksha* in Hindu temples is similar to the *chaitya vriksha* and was probably derived from the latter. It may stand either on the ground or, more often, on a raised platform. It is generally situated in the outer *prakara* (enclosure) of the temple and stands apart from the daily ritual.

While the sacred tree was called *chaitya vriksha* till the epic period, the term *sthala vriksha* appears in *Puranic* literature. The *Matsya Purana* and *Padma Purana* describe the sanctity of the trees associated with the *sthala* and how there were massive *vriksha mahotsavas* or tree planting festivals.

According to the *Skanda Purana*, the *devas* worshipped the self-created (*Svayambhu*) *lingams* in the forest. The tree under which the *lingam* appeared was described as the *sthala vriksha*. This legend, among others, points to the fact that the trees protected the image to be worshipped prior to the construction of temples.

Why did the term, *chaitya vriksha*, transform into *sthala vriksha*? The answer probably lies in the changing form of worship. Earlier, the tree was the *chaitya* or pro-

tector of the image, as depicted so often in art. The emphasis in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism was on images housed either in a rock-cut cave or beneath a tree.

From the *Puranic* period onwards, the emphasis was on the

construction of impressive temples and temple complexes. The protector tree gave way to the tree of the sacred spot (*sthala*). *Puranic* literature is replete with the importance of pilgrimages to sacred *sthalas*.

## Sacred Groves



Similar to the worship of sacred tree is reverence for sacred groves, dedicated to local deities and/or ancestral spirits. Often, sacred groves are homes of the sacred trees. Sacred groves probably represent the single most important ecological tradition of ancient Indian culture. Their conservation is a long tradition of conser-

ving nature by giving it a spiritual dimension.

The forests are the property of the gods of the villages in which they are situated, and the trees cannot be cut without leave from the headman, whose office is hereditary, and who is also the *pujari* (priest) of the sacred grove. All forms

of vegetation in the sacred groves are supposed to be under the protection of the deity of that grove, the removal of even a small twig being a taboo.

Sacred groves serve as a seed source (through dispersal by birds) through which ecological restoration can be achieved.

Sacred groves are an important



refuge for rare, endangered, and threatened medicinal plants. For example, *Kunstleria keralensis*, a climbing legume reported from a sacred grove in southern Kerala, is found only in that grove. A rare species of cinnamon, *cinnamomum quilonensis*, is found only in some kavus (sacred groves) of Alapuzha district in Kerala. The Kallabbekkan sacred grove in *Kumta taluka* of Karnataka, despite being in the

midst of areca-nut gardens of a populated village, is rich in endemics such as wild nutmeg (*Myristica malabarica*), cinnamon (*Garcinia gummi-gutta*), and wild pepper (*Piper nigrum*, piper is derived from the Sanskrit *pippali*).

A new species of frog, *Philautus sanctisilvaticus*, has recently been reported from the Amarkantak sacred grove in Madhya Pradesh.

Sacred groves are also associated with perennial water bodies like streams, ponds, lakes, and wells, and serve as valuable resources for nearby localities in terms of water supply in the dry season. Transpiration from the sacred groves increases atmospheric humidity and reduces the temperature in the immediate vicinity, producing

a more favourable microclimate for many organisms.

Soil erosion is prevented because of the trees' capacity to retain water and bind the soil. The soil itself has few nutrients with which to support the large biomass of the sacred grove. Many micro organisms, invertebrates, fungi, and a vast array of other species also live on these root systems.



## Tree Worship outside India

Tree worship is the most prevalent form of worship all over the world. The Roman 'forest king' was the personification of the spirit of the sacred tree, the oak, his living dual. The oak worship of the Druids is familiar. The Celts worshipped Jupiter in the form of a tall oak tree. An ancient sanctuary still exists in the name of Nemi in Italy, which comes from the Greek and Latin *nemos/nemus*, 'a forest enclosing pastures, groves and a group of trees considered to be sacred'.

Sacred groves were common among the Germans and the oldest sanctuaries were natural woods. The ancient Greeks represented the spirit of conservation by the goddess Artemis, who was protector of wildlife and the wilderness too. Artemis endowed the wilderness with sacredness.

There are several recorded instances of tree worship in America. A huge cypress was hung all over the votive offering, besides hundreds of locks of hair, teeth, and bits of ribbon.

## Conclusion

Tree worship was a result of man's natural reverence for a creation of nature that provided food, shelter, fodder, timber, and so much more. Their utility elevated trees into objects of worship.

Tree worship is inherent in all the religions emanating from India. Literature, temples, and art forms-all show the worship of trees. Trees were more than ordinary creations: They represented life itself.

Tree worship continues to be an element of modern Hinduism. Unusual practices and customs abound in the worship of trees, from circumambulation and making votive offerings to even performing mar-

riages between trees. It is predominantly women who worship trees and confer sanctity on them.

Let me conclude with a Punjabi ode I found on the internet. This says it all.

The Pipal sings, the Banyan sings,  
And the green mulberry too.  
Stop, traveller, listen  
Your soul will be set right.  
Under the Banyan tree  
I happened to see God Almighty.  
Tell me, O Pipal tree,  
Which is the path to heaven?  
O, silent Pipal tree,  
Open the knot of my soul.  
The Banyan knows the secrets;  
No good telling a lie in its presence. □



Pipal Tree

Bannian Tree