

Nature conservation in India: Through tree worship

Dr. Narendra Kumar Sharma
Govt Lohia College,
Churu, Rajasthan

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Conservation is a state of harmony between man and environment. It is not an option, but the direst necessity. Without it man may jeopardize his own survival. Among various components of environment flora and fauna is an important component. Forest are complex ecosystems that affect almost every species on the planet. This part of ecosystem is in grave danger due to deforestation.¹ Deforestation has now become an alarming problem. An estimated 18 million acres of forest which is roughly the size of the country of Panama, are lost each year.² NASA predicts that if current deforestation levels proceed, the world's rainforest may be completely in as little as 100 years. Deforestation is considered to be one of the contributing factors to global climate change the deforestation not only lessen the amount carbon stored, it also releases carbon-di-oxide into the air. This is because when tree die, they also release the stored carbon. Deforestation has decreased global vapor flows from land by 4 percent. Even this slight change in vapor flows can disrupt natural weather patterns and change current climate models. Many species are losing their habitat to deforestation and this in turn lead to species extinction. Trees are also important for water recycling and controlling the soil erosion the cutting of the world's full time generators and purifiers of air and water, is creating serious problems to environment and human health.

Ancient Indian history shows us a remarkable path to conserve and protect trees from destruction. This path is a custom of trees worshipping. The early Indians worshiped Tulsi, Neem, Pipal, Bel, Banyan, Sal, Banana trees not only as having religious importance but also of medicinal value. The tree worship in India probably was the earliest prevalent form of religion which may be predated to the Vedic period. It is through veneration and glorification of trees that man attempted to approach and propitiate the divinity with the perception that gods existed in plants and trees. It appears that perhaps the Indian seers attributed religiosity to plants for the maintenance of ecological balance.

Prior to Vedic culture we find evidences of tree worshipping in India. In Harappa civilization numerous terracotta figurines of women have been found. The picture of deity is represented on a seal in the midst of the branches of the pipal. In one figurine a plant is shown growing out of the embryo of a woman. Probably the image represents the goddess of earth, and it was intimately connected with the origin and growth of plants. The Harappans therefore, looked upon the earth as a fertility goddess and worshipped her. Large number of seals, metal images and potteries, discovered in excavation, having mark of trees like pipal, Babool, Neem and Date etc. Proved that the people of the Indus region also worshipped trees.³

The knowledge about the origin and significance of plants can be traced out from Vedic literature in detail. In Rigveda one Aranyani sukta is addressed to the deity of forest.⁴ Aranyani, queen of the forest received high praise from the sage, not only for her gifts to men but also for her charm. Forests should be green with trees and plants. Oshadhi sukta of Rigveda addresses to plants and vegetables as mothers, "O mother! hundreds are your birth places and thousands are your shoots".⁵ The plants come to existence on this earth before the creation of animals.⁶ The Atharvaveda mentions certain names of Oshadhis with their values. Later this information became important source for the Ayurveda. The Rig-Veda instructs that forest

should not be destroyed.⁷ The Atharvaveda talks about the relation of plants and earth. "The earth is keeper of creation, container of forests, trees and herbs".⁸ Plants are live. The Atharvaveda prays for continuous growth of herbs – "O earth! what on you, I dig out, let that quickly grow over."¹⁰ And another prayer says 'O earth! Let me not hit your vitals'.¹¹ The 'Avi' elements referred in the Atharvaveda as the cause of greenness in trees is considered generally by Vedic scholars as chlorophyll.¹² The term 'Avi' is derived from the root 'Av' and thus gives the direct meaning of protector. Chandogya Upanishad elaborates "water have generated plants which in turn generate food."¹³ The 'PrithviSukta' in Atharvaveda dedicated to the earth goddess is unquestionably the oldest evocative environment invocation. The mother earth was celebrated for all her natural bounties and particularly for her gifts of herbs and vegetation. The Vedic seers had their ashramas (hermitages) only in the forest areas where the environment is cool and free from pollution and where they could compose hymns and sacred literature. They repeatedly offered prayers for making plants and herbs sweets and invigorating.¹⁴ All the Vedic educational institutions (gurukulas) were located in the forest areas amidst the serene environment which generate pious ideas and good thinking. Since the pupils and gurus lived in a natural environment naturally they were concerned about its preservation and protection. They worshipped tree as vrikshdevata (tree god) and forest as van devata (forest god) and had the concept of Kalpavriksha (the wish fulfilling tree).

The epics like the Ramayan (1000/900 B.C.) and the Mahabharat (900/800 B.C.) at various places refers to the importance of trees. Both these epics are replete with reference of forests. Valmiki, the author of the Ramayan and vedvyasa, the author of the Mahabharat had their ashramas in the forests. Ravan had the famous beautiful garden known as the 'Ashoka Vatika'. Bali and Sugriva who belonged Kishkindha region may not be actual monkeys but belong to the non Aryan group and protectors of the jungle wealth.

Sugriva had thorough knowledge of forest and hill regions of South India and helped Ram who is considered the supreme human being (Purushoattam) in finding out and recovering Sita from Sri Lanka.

In ancient India all Piple, Neem and the Banyan trees were esteemed and worshipped. The image of lord Jagannath at Puri is made of Neem tree. The Apauruseya tree which was found floating on the sea was a Banyan tree. Moreover, the tree 'urdhaMulaAdhahsakra' which is mentioned in the Bhagwat Gita, is a Pipl tree.¹⁵ Atharveda too states that pipal is the abode of the gods and is grown in the third loka etc. 'Swargoloka' Lord Krishna also breathed his last under Pipl tree.¹⁶

In Jainism and Buddhism some trees are considered very significant. The tree 'KalpaVriksh' was famous and the religious symbol of Jainas. The Budha got enlightenment under the Pipal tree which was henceforth called Bodhi tree, Lastly he died under the grove of Sala tree on account of such associations with the Budha, these trees are regarded as sacred by the Buddhist. Buddhism adopted the cult of tree-worship which was already prevalent in the country. In the jataka tales Budha is symbolized with different trees; therefore, trees are regarded as objects of worship in Buddhism, Sal, Ashok, Plaksa and Pipal, udumbara are sacred trees for Buddhists.

We find great concern for trees in Puranas. Puranas conceptualized that trees feel happiness and sorrow and attributed auspiciousness to plantation of trees. In Bhavisyas Puran. "A tree is said to render a sonless person the virtue of having a son". Padma Purana mentions "trees like Pipal, bel, ber, neem etc. are the abode of god and are not to be cut which indicate that trees were sanctified by the people who through religion tried to conserve vegetation and forest. From Puroshottama Mahatyma of Skanda Purana we come to know that there existed, during the Universal deluge, the sacred Kshetra and the great 'Nyogrodha' (Bargad) tree with four branches." It seems that in course of time the conception of Puroshottam having four arms led devotees to look upon the tree itself as the embodiment of Vishnu. Thus in course of time Nyogrodha, Udumbara (Goolar) and Pipal were considered as the embodiment of the God Vishnu.¹⁸

Even famous anthropologist Sir James Frazer wrote about the cult of tree worship in India. The worship of trees is one of the most widespread form of popular religions in India; and examples of the reverence paid to them by Hindus of all classes occur in every village, town and city from the Himalayas to cape Comorian. In his words "this cult arises in the first place from the widespread primitive belief that trees have soul of their own like men, that they feel injuries done to them, and that the tree is the home of a tree spirit, which gives rain and sunshine, causes crops to grow, makes herds multiply and blesses women with offering. Thus all over India one comes across groves and clumps of trees which are firmly believed to be the abode of spirits and which no villager will therefore injure or cut down."¹⁹

Thus it is evidently clear that early Indians realizing the contribution and value of trees gave them prime

importance and devised the way of 'worshipping trees' so that they could be saved from destruction. Making trees sacred and venerable they tried to create an awareness for tree protection in common people. Thus under the umbrella of religion our ancestors made a successful attempt to conserve the nature through tree worshipping.

References:

1. Deforestation is the permanent destruction of forest in order to make the land available for other uses like, building roads, agriculture purpose etc.
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4. Rigved 10.146
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6. Ibid 10.97.1
7. Ibid 8.1.13
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9. Ibid 1.32.1,
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13. Chandogya Up. 6.2.4
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