

Tree Welfare as Envisaged in Ancient Indian Literature

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Trees have played a vital role in human welfare from time immemorial that indeed all beings on the earth owe much to them. They have been revered all over the world since ancient times. The Creator has created trees to nourish and sustain living beings in various ways. Trees provide flowers, fruits, shade and also shelter to various living beings. They bear the severe sun, lashing winds, rains, and other natural disasters and yet protect us. They are verily like one's sons that it is a sin to chop them down. Tree worship is the earliest and most prevalent form of religion ever since Vedic times. People gave due credit to the life essence and divinity that dwelt within trees and chose to axe them harmoniously suitable only to meet their needs. Trees are embodiments of hospitality for various travelers on pathways. The welfare of trees was envisaged by the ancient sages who spoke about the divine and medicinal values of several trees. The vast Indian literature is replete with glories of trees hailed by ancient people of this land that the present paper tries to bring out.

Tree welfare in ancient Vedic texts

The Rigveda (RV) itself is rich in its glorification of trees whose chief deity is

Soma. RV [5.41.11] states: "May the plants, waters and sky preserve us and woods and mountains with their trees for tresses" (Arya and Joshi, 2005). The Atharvaveda Samhita [AV 5.19.9] has a curious claim that states: "Him the trees drive away saying 'Do not come unto our shadow', who O Narada, plots against that which is the riches of the Brahman" (Joshi, 2004).

*Tam vriksha apa sedhanti chaayaam no mopagaa iti|
Yo braahmanasya saddhanamabhi naarada manyate||*

The glorious ancient tradition of living harmoniously with Nature to maintain the ecological balance was well understood by our ancient seers that they extended the same rites of marriage meant for humans to all other living beings including trees. Even axing a tree for the purpose of sacrificial wood was ritualized so that one had the highest regard for trees. The person who is nominated to cut or axe the tree must first touch the tree with blades of *darbha* (*Desmostachya bipinnata*) grass at the exact spot on the tree trunk where the first stroke of axe would fall and utter the *mantra* (chant) 'O axe, harm it not', as stated in the *Taittiriya Samhita* (TS) (Kashyap, 2003) and *Maitrayani Samhita* (MS) (Dharmadhikari *et al.*, 1990) [TS 6.3.3.2;

MS 3.8.3] and ensures that it falls towards east (Sheshadri, 2012). The *Shatapatha Brahmana* states that plants do not forget the injuries made to them and take revenge in their future births.

Tree welfare in epics and Puranas

Sage Valmiki's Ramayana throws greater details of the welfare of trees as visioned by those earlier sages (Mudholakara, 1991). Sages like Vishvamitra, Vasishta, Atri, Agastya, and Sarabhanga whose hermitages have been described in the text had large number of trees in their premises that were looked after by the inmates of the hermitage daily with loving care. So great was the welfare of trees that they were watered and manured so as to produce pleasing seasonal fruits and flowers. The trees were treated like human beings that the epic portrays Lord Rama lamenting about his wife Sita being kidnapped by Ravana and overcome by grief he addresses the trees in the ashram as:

“O Kadamba (*Anthocephalus cadamba*) tree, your flowers were admired by my beloved. Have you seen her?”

Elsewhere he addresses the other trees like *ashoka* (*Saraca asoca*), *tala* (*Borassus flabellifer*), *shala* (*Shorea robusta*), *bakula* (*Mimusops elengi*), and *chandana* (*Santana album*) enquiring about Sita.

Sage Vyasa's Mahabharata [*Shanti Parva*] also speaks entirely of trees and the consciousness possessed by them by being sensitive to heat, cold, and thunder sounds. It states that plants can hear just as humans do with their ears (Mishra, 1988). They

provide fruits and flowers by intake of tasty substances through water, even sustaining the extreme heat, or stricken by disease.

*Usmato mlayate parnam tvak phalam
puspameva ca| mlayate shiryate
chapi sparshastenaatra vidyate||
vaayavamnyashani nirghosah phalam
puspam vishiryate| shrotrena grhyate
shabdastasmachrunvanti paadapah|| valli
veshtayate vriksham sarvvataschaiva
gacchati| nahyadrustushca maargo 'sti
tasmaat pashyanti paadapaah||
punyaapunyaistatha gandhairdhoopashcha
vividhairapi| arogaah puspitaah santi
tasmaajighranti paadapaah|| yaadaih salila
paanaacca vyaadhinañcaapi darshanat|
vyaadhipratikriyatvaacha vidyate rasanam
drume|| vaktrenotpalanaalena yathordve
jalamaadadet| Tathaa pavanasamyuktah
paadaih pibati paadapaah||*

The *Matsya Purana* (Singh, 1997) speaks of the greatness of *Kalpavriksha* (celestial tree). It prescribes degree of punishment proportionate to the guilt [Chapter 227, 91–95]. Extolling the virtues of trees the *Kurma Purana* [*Danakhanda*, XIII] states that trees are verily like one's sons. Growing many trees is equivalent to establishing as many wells or tanks (Tagare, 1997; Joshi, 2001a).

*Vrikshacchetta vriksh yastu sa
naadivranavan bhavet| vaksyaami
tatpratikaaram sarvalokahitaaya tu|
dashakoopasamaa vaapi dashavaapisamo
drumah|| dashadrumasamah putraah
dashaputraasamodrumah| putraurvina
shubhaphalam na bhavetraraanaam|
dusputraakairapi tathobhayalokanaashah|*

etadvicharya sudhiyaa paripaalaya vrikshaan| yatnena vedavidhinaa parikalpaniyaa|| [Danakhanda, XIII]

The *Varaha Purana* [172.39] says that by planting one peepul (*Ficus religiosa*), one neem (*Azadirachta indica*), one vata (*Ficus benghalensis*), ten flowering plants, two narangi (*Citrus aurantium*), and five mango (*Mangifera indica*) trees one can avoid going to hell (Shastri and Iyer, 2003). Planting of various trees gives different benefits as stated in the *Puranas*. The *Varaha Purana* [162.41–42] clearly states that five biggest favors bestowed by trees are like five great sacrifices (*Panchayajna*), giving fuel to families, shade, and resting place to travelers, nests to birds, and medicines from leaves, roots, and bark. Thus while extolling the greatness of the sacred place *Gokarna*, the *Varaha Purana* states that “Each tree is *Agnihotrin* (one who performs fire rituals) performing its sacrifice (*Panchayajna*)” as mentioned above.

In the *Bhagavatha Purana*, Lord Krishna speaks on the greatness of trees to the cowherds while grazing their cows (Shastri, 1988). His golden words ought to be echoed through the forthcoming ages so that trees will be protected. He says:

“Behold these trees! They bear severe sun, lashing winds, rains and yet protect us. Leaves and flowers, bark and wood, sap and gun fuel, and fruits, many are the gifts the trees bestow upon us. Blessed are the people who give generously to others like these trees.” [Skanda 10, 22.37]

The *Bhavishya Purana* [*Rajadharm Kaustubha Kanda*] states that by planting one peepul (*Ficus religiosa*), one neem

(*Azadirachta indica*), one bargad (*Ficus benghalensis*), 10 tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*), 3 kaith (*Limonia acidissima*), 3 bilva (*Aegle marmelos*), 3 aonla (*Emblia officinalis*; Indian gooseberry), 5 mango (*Mangifera indica*) trees, one can never go to hell (Singh, 2008).

The *Agni Purana* [*Varuna Aramapratishtha*] states: “Never cut down any tree that bears good flowers and fruits, if you desire the increase of your family, of your wealth and of your future happiness. The man who cuts down trees giving cool shade is tortured by the agents of Lord Yama in the grim region of hell known as *Asipatra* (trees have sword- or knife-shaped leaves) forests” (Joshi, 2001b). Elsewhere the same text while praising the tanks and trees [*Tadaaga Vriksha Prashamsa Adhyaya*] states: “The man who plants trees bearing fruits and flowers for the enjoyment of the public attains a Supreme state of bliss. One should worship trees as one worships a sage free from the vice of envy, because it provides shade and fruits and flowers even to its cutter. The all giving Tree which acts as a Son does not bear any grudge even to its cutter out of selfish consideration and brings about the complete salvation to the planter.

The glorious ancient tradition of living harmoniously with Nature to maintain the ecological balance was well understood by our ancient seers that they extended the same rites of marriage meant for humans to all other living beings including trees.

Therefore one should plant trees with due ceremony and treat them as his Sons.”

Tree welfare in Post-Vedic texts

Ancient Indian people had high reverence for trees that they even solemnized the marriages of certain species of trees keeping a greater harmonious ecological relation. A typical insect by its act of pollination solemnizes the marriage of male and female parts of a plant thus creating fruits in it. Several texts like *Arka Vivaha*, *Arkavivahaprayoga*, *Tulasi Vivaha*, and *Ashvattha Vivaha Vidhi* of Saunaka refer to the marriage rites for trees such as *ashvattha* (*Ficus religiosa*), *tulasi* (*Ocimum sanctum*), and *arka* (*Calotropis procera*). These portray the harmonious ecological relations shared by our ancestors (Sheshadri, 2010).

Patanjali, author of *Mahabhashya*, states that the manes (*Pitrs*) feel pleased if one waters and tends mango trees.

Aamrascha siktaah pitaraschaprinitah||
[Act I]

Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsha* [13.46] exclaims the greatness of trees in the hermitage grove of Sage Sarabhanga (Kale, 2002). The trees were acting as his sons and in his absence they used to welcome guests with their sweet, delicious fruits and also refreshed travelers.

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*Chaayavineetadhvaparishramesu
bhooyisthasambhaavyaphalesvamisu|
Tasyaatithinnamadhuna saparya sthita
suputresviva paadapesu||*

The trees thus acted as embodiments of hospitality for the visiting guests of the hermitage. Elsewhere the same text of *Raghuvamsha* gives another astonishing fact as to how visitors to various hermitages enquired the well-being of all inmates and also the welfare of trees in the premises. Sage Vishvamitra on visiting the hermitage of Sage Vasishtha enquires thus:

*Vishvamitro mahateja vanaspati gane
tadaa| sarvatra kushalam praaha Vasistho
raajasattamam||* [52.5]

The Arthashastra [3.19.28] of Kautilya says that for injuring trees situated in various city parks that bore flowers, fruits, and other substances, the punishments were levied on the culprits responsible for it according to the part of tree damaged (Kangle, 1986).

Sri Harsha in his drama *Nagananda* (7th century CE) extols that even the plant and animal kingdom does not forget to provide hospitality to the guests. He states that “Even trees are trained to serve guests. These trees seem as if they are welcoming

sweetly with the humming of bees, as if they were bowing down their heads through their well bent branches due to the plentitude of fruits and as if they were offering *Arghya* (water for reception) through their shower of flowers” (Bae Bak-Kun, 1992).

*Madhuramiva vadanti svaagatam
bhringashabdaih nataamiva
phalanamraihkurvate'mi shirobhih|
mama vadata ivaarghyam puspavrshatih
kirantah kathamatithisaparyam shiksitah
shakhino'pi||*

Banabhatta in his excellent work *Kadambari* dated to about the same period also highlights the hospitable nature of trees in the hermitages of Sage Jabali as follows (Shastri, 1961; Chakravorthy, 1965):

*Taapasagnihotradhoomalekhabhiru-
tsarpantibhiranishamupapaadita
krshnajinottaraangashobhah
phalamoolabhrito valkalino
nishcetanaastaravopi saniyama iva
laksyante asya bhagavatah kim punah
sacetanah praaninah|*

“Trees also seem to wear bark dress and carry roots and fruits for their food and they

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are so fancied to be observing a vow devoid of discrimination or consciousness.”

Hitopadesha of Narayanadeva, dated 12th century CE stated that a tree does not withdraw its shade even from one who axes it (Peterson, 1999).

*Sevityo mahavriksha
phalacchayasamanvitah|
Yadi daivaatphalam naasti chaya kena
nivaryate||*

Similarly *Sadukti Karnamrita* of Sridharadasa dated 13th century CE speaks of *ashvattha* (*Ficus religiosa*) as pathway tree (*Margataru*) and praises it for services rendered to humanity (Banerji, 1965). Trees on the roadways are also highly revered as seen in the verses of trees in the *Subhashitavali* of Vallabhadeva dated 16th century CE (Karmarkar, 1961).

*Chaayavanto gatavyalah svarohah
phaladaayinah| maargadruma
mahantashcha pashameva bhootaye||*

People are also grateful to trees for showering their grace of fruits, leaves, and shade that one poet in his *Anyokti* [248.20] claims:

*Bhuktam svaaduphalam krtam
ca shayanam shakhagrajaih
pallavaistvacchayaparishitalam susalila
pitam vyapaneshramaih| vishrantah suciram
param sumanasah preetih kimatrocyate*

tvam sanmargarurvayam ca pathika yamah punardarshanam||

“O tree, we enjoyed your sweet fruits, we rested on the bed made from your tender leaves thus getting rid of our fatigue, we drank water which was quite cool due to your shade. We relaxed under you for a long time. Still what you are after all a benevolent tree on the road side and we are travellers moving from one place to another. Hence we bid goodbye to you, see you again.”

The *Bhamini vilasa* of Pandita Jagannatha dated 17th century CE offers regards to the tree (Dadape and Apte, 1994):

“O tree, you bear burden of flowers, leaves, and fruits, give relief to people from the sun and give them succour during winter. Thus you dedicate your entire life in helping others. That is why you are greater than a gentleman. Therefore O tree, please accept my regards.”

Another poet Vidyakara Mishra in the anthology *Vidyakara Sahasrakam* speaks of the gifts bestowed by trees (Mishra, 1942).

Chayabhiih prathamam tatah sukusumaih pashcaatphalaih svaadubhih prinaatyesa taruh pratitipathikaih shrantaih samaashriyate| ko jaanaati yadatra kotastate pratyagrahaalaahala jvaalaajaalakaraalakaalavadanah kroorah phani vartate||

Even medieval literature and inscriptions throw vast light on the welfare of trees considered by the rulers. One of the edicts of Shivaji, the Maratha ruler rightly protects

the trees of the kingdom as it states (WWF, 1997):

“Mango and jackfruit trees of our kingdom provide suitable timber for naval purposes. But they should not be touched for it is not as if these trees can be grown in a year or two. People plant them and bestow on them long years of care as they would on their own children. If by chance an old tree has ceased to bear fruits then it may be taken with the consent of the owner after persuasion and payment of compensation. Coercion shall not under any circumstances be pardoned.”

Tree welfare in tribal culture

Several tribal communities all over India have been contributing to tree protection and welfare since ancient times. Tribal communities live in or near forests and live harmoniously with Nature using the forest products such as wood, bark, fruits, and medicinal herbs. They have a rich knowledge about various uses of the plants and trees and use some of these to treat many diseases. Such knowledge has been widely documented in literature as ethnomedicine studies (Jain, 1996). One of the best and cherishing

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movement to save and protect trees was carried out by the *Bishnoi* communities of Rajasthan. They emerged as a distinctive community around 1470 CE when Guru Jambheshwarji introduced several principles. The *Bishnois* continue to abide by these principles. The Guru lived during a ten-year drought period in Rajasthan and saw the land and animals being destroyed and stripped of resources. So he established these principles by which they could encourage a better relationship with Nature. A total of 363 *Bishnoi* women, men, and children led by Amrita Devi sacrificed their lives to protect the *khejri* (*Prosopis cineraria*) trees from the soldiers of King Abhay Singh of Jodhpur who sought to chop down the forests in 1730 CE for firing his lime kilns to build his beautiful palace. Amrita Devi embraced the trees and was decapitated in front of her two daughters who stoically followed her example. People from the villages flocked there and hundreds gave up their lives clinging to trees until the King had to finally subside and order a decree protecting the *Bishnoi* land from deforestation (Reichert, 2013). Similarly there have been other cases of protecting trees in various parts of the country. Many tribal communities have the concept of sacred groves wherein special trees are grown and promoted for worship. Special *vratas* (fasting) devoted to tree welfare such as *Ashokashtami* and *Madanotsava* promoted the species to be protected in such sacred groves. Similarly in 1974 as part of the *Chipko* movement, several people in the mountainous regions of Northern India hugged trees so as to stop big lumber companies from deforesting the mountains (Albert, 2003). Such recent movements portray that tree welfare is of

“O tree, you bear burden of flowers, leaves, and fruits, give relief to people from the sun and give them succour during winter. Thus you dedicate your entire life in helping others. That is why you are greater than a gentleman. Therefore O tree please accept my regards.”

high priority so as to maintain the ecological balance of the Planet in which we live. Thus tribal communities also have contributed in their own way from ancient times thus allowing these species of plants, medicinal herbs, and trees to be protected.

Conclusions

Trees have their own prominence in Nature and have been glorified by people from ancient days. They are sacred to some deity or are shade-giving, or bear fruits or flowers which one needs for worship. Ancient sages and poets gave due credit to the life essence and divinity that dwelt within trees and allowed people to axe them harmoniously suitable only to meet their needs. Ancient texts also enjoin that a selfish motive of axing trees cruelly without regard to their divinity or to their gifts like shade, flowers, and fruits bestowed on creatures was a grave sin amounting to suffering in hell.

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In an age where care for trees and animal life is declining, practices for welfare of trees such as marriage rites and other rites based on seasonal festivities promote the protection of plant species by production of offsprings that maintain a healthy ecological condition. Future generations need to imbibe this ancient essence of harmonious care and welfare of trees and also axing them harmoniously even if needed.

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