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## Trees in Indian Mythology and Folktales: An Approach to Sustainability of Nature and Humankind

Pritha Kundu

Assistant Professor of English

Hiralal Mazumdar Memorial College for Women

Dakshineswar, Kolkata

### ABSTRACT

Since the pre-historic times, trees have been regarded as anthropomorphic entities in several ancient cultures, and our Indian culture is no exception. From the Upanishads to Mahakavyas and Puranas, from folktales to tribal lores, trees have always occupied a significant position. Even a brief overview of all these may reveal that our fore-parents, whether learned sages or commoners—farmers and forest-dwelling people, had the awareness regarding the preservation of trees, their importance in human life as well as their spiritual significance, and thus nurtured a conscious approach to what now we call ‘sustainability of nature and humankind’. This paper, limited in scope, proposes to offer case-studies of a selected body of mythological accounts and folktales, with a hope to bring forward the environmental consciousness involved therein.

Keywords: Trees, Eco-poetics, Preservation, Mythologies, Folktales

### Introduction:

The importance of trees recognised in Indian culture, in terms of literatures (both oral and written) available, are manifold. Trees had been regarded as natural deities in both Aryan and Non-Aryan cultures; they offer several means of sustenance to humankind, certain trees are considered as ‘sacred’; tree-worship is a major aspect in several regional cultures, and certain trees—especially Bata (Banyan), Asvattha, Neem, Sahakara (Mango) and Bilva or ‘Bel’-- have a special religious significance. The agriculture-based Aryan civilization looked upon trees as a very important source of life and sustenance, and at the same time, the forest-dwelling sages viewed the ‘Aranyani’ as a highly esteemed seat of mystical, philosophical and spiritual reflections. Coming from the ancient sages to common people, we may further notice that there are customs of ‘marriage between trees’ or ‘marriage with trees’ in several regions of India, plant-imagery is part of our everyday use of languages. For instance, we say in Bengali “*Uni batgacher moto amader agle rekhechilen*” (“He protected us like a big banyan tree” – while speaking of some benevolent guardian-figure), or “*Shekore fera*” (going back to the roots). Tree or plant related images are abundant in Hindi idioms, such as ‘patta katna’ (cutting of leaves, in the sense of removing someone from a post), or “*boya pedh babool ka aam knaha se khay*” (“If

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you plant a babool tree, how can you eat mangoes”). In Odiya language, a popular proverb goes like “*phalanti gacha phopod sohe*” (“burdens are for shoulders strong to carry them”). And in Santali, the mother is often called ‘*toya dare*’ (tree of milk), marriage is referred to as ‘*sikri jadao*’ (binding of roots), and separation is meant by ‘*sakam adech*’ (leaves falling apart). Unquestionable is the presence of trees in our everyday life, in our talks, practices and emotions. In this paper, we hope to bring forward some instances of how trees have been represented across our Mythologies, Religious Scriptures, Mahakavyas and folktales, with a purpose to re-evaluate and understand our traditional approach to conservation of nature and maintaining ecological balance.

### **Materials and Methods:**

Beginning from the Vedic age, materials on the proposed topic are huge and dynamic in nature; several scholars dealing with the Indian conception of ‘Ecopoetics’ have referred to these materials so many times. But a comprehensive compilation and holistic understanding of such materials is yet to be done, and it would be a Herculean task. The present author has neither the ability nor the scope of doing that, but a brief overview of materials may be provided.

The *Aranyaka*-part of the Vedas were especially meant for study in the hermitages, set in the bosom of dark, deep and dense woodlands. It is not possible to discuss all aspects of tree-worship in this regard, but we may refer to, for instance, the *Aranyani-sukta* in *Rigveda*, and the verses conceptualizing the Brahmanda (the universe) as a great Pippala tree; and on its two major branches, perch Jivatma and Paramatma, as two birds (*Rigveda* 1.164.20). In the *Mahabharata*, both Vishnu and Siva have been identified with Asvattha; and in *Vishnusahasranama*-stotra, Vishnu is referred to as another ‘sacred’ tree—Udumvara (*Mahabharata*13.127.101). Besides, well-known is the account of the *Ramayana*, where Rama, after losing Sita, frantically asks each and every trees and plants (also birds and other creatures), if they know anything about Sita, who loved them so dearly. In Vaishnava literatures, the Kadamva and Tamala are given an iconic position, in association with the divine romance of Radha and Krishna.

With a brief overview of the ancient texts, we may now come to a selected number of folktales where the tree figures as the main character, or the central point of interest. One of our primary texts would be ‘A Flowering Tree’—a Kannada folktale collected and translated into English by the poet-researcher A. K. Ramanujan. Another text, ‘The Bonga Headman’, which appears in a collection of Santali folktales, compiled by C.H. Bompus, shows how a big banyan tree, functions as the guardian of the Santal village nearby. The last but not the least, comes a folktale popular in eastern India, where a man, willing to cut down a tree, finally realizes the value of it.

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Methods adopted in this paper involve Puranic (mythological) studies and folklore studies, analysed with an interdisciplinary approach.

## Discussion

Treatment of trees in ancient mythology and scriptures is a vast area, out of which we may single out the legends associated with a specific tree—Asvattha. In Indian culture, its religious significance is so high that its scientific nomenclature has to admit the same: *Ficus religiosa*. In *Bhagavadgita*, Sri Krishna identifies himself with the Asvattha tree—“I am Asvatthva, of all trees”—“*Asvatthah sarvavrikhanam*”(10.26) . Elsewhere in *Bhagabadgita* (15.1) it is said that the universe (in a philosophical sense) is like an Aswattha tree, whose roots are moving upwards, and the branches go downward. This tree is immortal, and the Vedamantra(s) are its leaves. One who can fully realise this tree of ‘samsara’, is the true knower of Vedas—

“*Urdhvamulamadhah sakham asvattham prahuravyam*

*Chandamsi yasya parnani yastam veda sa vedavit.*”

A similar idea is found in *Kathopanishad*, 2.3.1. Paramesvara or the Supreme God is identified with the roots of this great tree, spreading upward, and its branches, going downward, make up the world. The spiritual conception of this ‘immortal’ tree comes from a botanical fact that the roots of an Asvattha tree can live so long, that even if its branches are destroyed, a new tree can grow from the remaining roots. In light of the concept of sustaining the world on its roots, the ‘divine’ tree can also be interpreted as iconic of ecological balance.

If this is a highly philosophical conception concerning the importance of trees, let us now look at the selected pieces of folktales, to have a glimpse of the common peoples’ approach to trees. ‘A Flowering Tree’ tells of a woman who could transform herself into a flowering tree. For turning into a tree, someone would have to pour water all over her body, and when she would become a tree, one should pluck the flowers gently, without hurting a leaf or branch. The tree-woman was safe as long as her sister was the only person to know and maintain this secret. A prince, spying on the woman, discovered it, and married her. Every night he forced the bride to become a tree for him. The girl did it unwillingly, but still, she was ‘safe’—in the bed-chamber with her husband. Now, the prince’s evil sister noticed this and wished to ‘expose’ her sister-in-law. She took her into a pleasure garden, along with her friends, and forced her to become a tree. But the reckless friends of the princess did not pay heed to the caution, they twisted the branches and tore leaves from the tree-woman’s body, turning her into a crippled mass. They left her there, unattended, and returned. This onslaught upon the body of a woman amounts to a violation of the codes of nature. Here the woman’s creativity, her sexuality and agency is symbolized in terms of a flowering tree.

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Finally, the prince realized the worth of his wife in her absence, and went out in search of her. After long trials, he found her in the house of his elder sister, a married woman. Now he treats her with love and sympathy, and she comes back to her normal self. The folktale, with obvious possibilities of Ecofeminist interpretation, reflects upon the position of a woman in our society in light of the sexual politics underneath this story—a woman is safe only within a true sisterly bond, not even with other unmarried women outside her ‘own’ circle, for jealousy and rivalry reign there. Finally she can find a shelter in a married sister-in-law’s house, a ‘safer’ place, and be happy in the presence of a matured husband, who, through separation and sorrow, has learnt to love and respect her properly.

In the Santali folktale mentioned earlier, there was a village called Sharjomghutu on the bank of a river called Badi. The village was without a headman, because in earlier days, whoever used to be the headman, would die. Since then, in case of any problem, people would assemble under a big Banyan tree outside the village, and have consultations from the tree-spirit. If some poor villager needed anything, such as plates and containers, to feed some guests, he would go to the tree and ask for help. After some time, plates and glasses would be available under the tree. The householder who needed them, would take them home, use them, and after the feast was over, wash them and return to the tree.

The story is not just a folktale featuring the concept of a tribal god residing in a tree, it also reflects a transformation from the pre-historic stage of tribal lifestyle to a community-stage. According to the folklorist scholar Sudhirkumar Karan, the initial element of mysterious death(s) of the chieftains contains a primitive stage of fear concerning unnatural events. Then, the beginning of an assembly-consultation in front of the tree, points towards an agricultural stage of community life getting consolidated. Finally, the incident of getting personal help from the tree-spirit can be viewed as an addition of later times.

Another story (source: oral tradition) is about a farmer who wished to cut down a tree which grew on his land. The tree did not produce any sweet fruit, so he considered it ‘unnecessary’. But when he went to chop the tree off with an axe, the birds pleaded to him not to do it, because they would lose their shelter. The farmer did not pay any heed to the birds, and was ready to cast another blow. Then the small insects – butterflies, grasshoppers, crickets—whispered to him that they would sing for him all the night, if he can show kindness to the tree. The farmer, determined to cut the tree down, was again ready with his axe. Suddenly he found an abandoned bee-hive on it, with honey leaking out. Out of curiosity, he dipped his finger in the honey and tasted it, found it sweet and refreshing. Then he changed his mind and thought, the tree would be useful after all. He let it remain.

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What is interesting about the story is the notion that the tree is sustained by other creatures dependent on it. This is a direct approach to ecological balance—if the tree lives, other creatures will live on. And the farmer realizes its value when he himself becomes a consumer of a natural resource (in this case, honey) associated with the tree.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the instances discussed so far, it appears that the consciousness of sustainability, through the preservation of trees, was an integral part of the life and philosophies of our ancient predecessors— both in the Aryan and non-Aryan cultures, much before the hazardous consequences of global warming and ecological imbalance became so threatening to humanity. From the philosophical conception of a tree to the nature-woman association, from the folk-belief in a tree-dwelling benevolent spirit to a more modern sensibility of ecological sustainability-- our stories and legends can really teach us the elemental message of environmental awareness.

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