

---

**Adorning and Adoring:  
The Sacred Trees of India**

---

Louise Fowler-Smith

University of NSW, Art & Design  
Sydney, Australia  
l.fowler-smith@unsw.edu.au

**Abstract**

Sacred trees are found throughout India and venerated by those of varied religious groups, including animists, devotees of local cults, Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains. Since 2003 I have travelled the sub-continent of India, conducting interviews and photographing the aesthetic enhancement of trees as an act of worship. Here, examples of veneration and a selection of the myths, beliefs, and rituals that underlie this practice are provided. These trees, through their adornment by worshippers, become subjects of adoration for not only Indians, but also for outsiders as well. In reflecting on this, the link between the aesthetic and the sacred is shown to have the potential to inspire ethical, eco-conscious, and transcultural responses to the natural world.

**Keywords**

Sacred trees, sacred groves, tree veneration, environment, aesthetics.

*Introduction*

Today, sparked by indisputable proof of human agency in climate change, the environment is in the center foreground. It has become the radical edge. But the handle on that edge remains the land itself, how we see, understand, use and respond to it. (Lippard 2006: 14)

In 2003, I made my first field trip to India to research sacred trees and groves and continued to do so over the next ten years. Initially attracted to the enchanting beauty of these trees, I became committed to their study after learning that the veneration of the tree has the ability to protect trees from logging. I have since made numerous field trips to India to research and photograph the practice of decorating trees as an act of worship. These encounters with sacred trees and sacred tree rituals led me to realize that there is an aesthetic rationale for preserving the environment. The decoration demarcates the tree as set apart and special, inviting people to place further decorative items as offerings and glorifications to the gods. This broadens the way society approaches the tree, with the aesthetic enhancement enabling the transformation of the tree into a sacred object, which may also have impacts on those who are not members of the community who consider the tree sacred.

As Lucy Lippard has argued, how people see or perceive the land influences how they respond to it, and this relationship is of special importance in times of ecological crisis. It could be argued that contemporary Western capitalist society has come to perceive the land as separate or 'other', creating a feeling of disconnection from the environment. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, this sense of disconnection has come to have dangerous implications for the planet. If humanity is to survive what many perceive as a burgeoning ecological crisis, some have argued that a new vision is required, to guide and inspire a fresh creative period that influences how humans function in relation to the earth (Gottlieb 2004). It is possible to imagine this as a need to re-cognise the earth as a living reality and to reinvent our relation to the earth as a species. One way in which humanity might achieve this change is through examining culturally potent perceptions of nature, in this case, trees, as not only vital, but also sacred and transformative.

In what follows I provide an overview of my fieldwork studies of tree worship in India to give some indication of the breadth of the myths, methods, and motivations involved in this religious practice. In observing veneration in states and regions from the north to the south of India, diversity is evident, and this points to a complex and multi-layered relationship of religion to the environment. As a country at a turning point in terms of its commitment to reversing the effects of climate change and severe deforestation, the dual processes of adorning and adoring trees in India presents a fascinating potential for the reinvigoration of nature worship in a quickly modernising nation. However, experiencing the aesthetic impact of these trees also has ramifications for the outsider-onlooker. My research has led me to question whether it is possible for people outside of India to re-envision the environment

through witnessing this aesthetic, and if the sacredness of these trees could be transferred through artistic vision without transplanting any specific religious ideology.<sup>1</sup>

*Tree Veneration in India: Ancient Practice, Modern Implications*

Sacred trees and groves have existed historically in many parts of the world and may have been the origin of the earliest temple designs with the stone columns of the temple replacing the trees and the dim filtered light replicating the dappled light of the forest canopy. Tree worship declined with the rise of monotheistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, which preached that there could only be one God and that idolatry—the worship of material objects—was sacrilegious (Hageneder 2000: 56). A stark contrast to this regression of tree worship may be found in India where animism and polytheism undergird the nation's most populous religion, Hinduism, and tree veneration remains an important communal and personal activity.

There is a long history of respect for, and devotion to, trees and forests across many of India's religions, from rural indigenous traditions to urban forms of Hinduism. Ancient sacred scriptures, such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and the *Puranas*, make frequent reference to sacred trees and the importance of their preservation. The worship of trees and plants in India is based on both the utility of plants and their socio-religious role. There is a long list of trees and plants that have been perceived as sacred since the ancient Vedic period (which stretches as far back as 1500 BCE), including the pipal (*Ficus religiosa*), soma (*Sarcostemma acidum*), sami (*Prosopis ceneraria*), banyan (*Ficus indicus*), udumbara (*Ficus glomerata*), bilva (*Aegle marmelos*), khadira (*Acacia catechu*), neem (*Azadirachta indica*), tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*), palasa or plaksa (*Butea frondosa*), and the lotus (*Nelumbo nificera*) (Malla 2000: 25). Other trees may be considered sacred in certain districts, but this usually stems from its practical use in that particular region (Gadgil and Vartak 1976: 157; Fowler-Smith 2009: 45). As the brief descriptions here indicate, the forms that tree worship take in India are diverse and only a few examples and themes can be explored here.

According to the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), there are today approximately 65 million tribal people, or *adivasis*, in India, extending from the northern state of Kashmir to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the south (Varsha 2005: 1). The religious traditions of the tribal populations are akin to animism, although

1. Parts of this article were published elsewhere. See Fowler-Smith 2009.

traces of Sanskrit rites are marked in considerable proportions. Hence, nature plays a significant role in tribal religions with a multitude of spirits relating to ecological forms, such as mountains, rivers, forests, and trees. The majority of the gods, goddesses, and spirits are drawn from the natural surroundings, although sometimes one may find the anthropomorphic influence of Hinduism. Maintaining parallel belief systems does not typically threaten adivasis' practice, thus one can often find the traditional tribal wooden pillar or stones alongside sculptures that represent various Hindu gods and goddesses.

There are a great many tree-based traditions in India that span religious and local cultures. For example, a tree that is laden with fruit and dense foliage providing protection is believed to be sacred and named a *chaitya* tree (umbrella). Traditionally, almost all villages had their own *chaitya* tree which was considered the abode of the deities such as the *devas* (gods), *yakshas* (nature spirits), and *rakshasas* (demons) (Krishna and Amirthalingam 2014: 54). Each village had a *yaksha* shrine associated with the tree, called *yaksha chaitya*, and a tree shrine called *vriksha chaitya*. Originally, the *vriksha chaitya* was a tree of huge proportions, filling the space in which it rested and giving it the status of a symbol of the cosmos. The *chaitya vrikshas* are divided into the *rathya vrikshas*, representing the sacred roadside trees, and the *devata nishthana vriksha*, or trees that house the deities (Krishna and Amirthalingam 2014: 51). The *devata nishthana vriksha* can then be classified into *yaksha chaitya*, or trees that house spirits and *vriksha chaitya*, or tree shrines. A *chaturpatha varthi vriksha* is a tree that may be found at the junction of crossroads with devotional objects around the trunk (Amirthalingam 2005: 26).

When delving into the history of tree worship it is interesting to discover the influence tribal belief systems have had on more recent religions in India. The *yakshas* and *yakshinis*, for example, are considered nature deities that have a tribal origin. These deities were integrated into Buddhist, Jain, and Brahminical myths, legends, and iconography. The *yakshas* have powers that relate to wealth and fertility and are believed to live in sacred trees, providing them with the perfect observatory to oversee and participate in daily activities. It is easy to see how this belief system has translated into the wish-fulfilling tree of contemporary India, discussed below.

Trees and forests have been held to have transformative powers in all the major religions traditions of India with, arguably, the most famous example coming from the legend of the Buddha. The Buddha was said to have achieved enlightenment under the sacred pipal tree, a type of fig. Ultimate truth is known as *bodhi*; thus, the pipal was called the *bodhi* tree because of the belief that this tree assisted the Buddha in realising

the truth. In early Buddhism, the Buddha was occasionally depicted as a tree, making the bodhi tree the Great Awakener not the Buddha himself. The pipal tree is one of the oldest and most widely venerated trees in the Indus Valley and may have been associated with a god even in the pre-Vedic era (Haberman 2013: 50). It is worshipped today in both local cults and in relation to Vishnu and Shiva who, with Brahma, form the *Trimūrti* or supreme trinity of the Hindu pantheon.

Hinduism, the major religion of India comprised of a vast polytheistic network of gods, exhibits many practices and views that possibly derive from older animistic religious cultures. Trees, not least because of their ability to give food, medicine, shade, and oxygen, have been central objects of worship in Hinduism. A tree was often considered to symbolise or house a deity or sacred being, or to represent the notion of sacredness in general (Malla 2000: 51). For example, the *Rig Veda* defines the cosmos as a tree with a thousand branches (*sahasravalsa vanaspati*) (Amirthalingam 2005: 33). The *Upanishads*, said to be written by forest-dwelling sages, depict the creator god Brahma as a tree in its cosmogony, with all other deities appearing as his branches: ‘The Tree of Eternity has its roots in heaven above and its branches reach down to earth. It is Brahman, pure Spirit, who in truth is called the Immortal. All the worlds rest on that Spirit and beyond him none can go’ (Mascaro 1965: 65). Spiritually significant forests and trees are also ubiquitous in the stories of the Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (Bhajla, Mukherjee, and Singh 1984: 37-38).

Throughout India, Hindu communities venerate their own individual deity, or *gramadevata*, ‘which are regarded as synonymous with the locality and everything within it’ (Huylar 1951: 102). The *gramadevata* is not visible to the local community, so a specific place or object is chosen to direct the act of worship. The *devasthanā*, or shrine of a *gramadevata*, is usually connected with an important feature of the natural world—such as a hill, a rock, a stream, or a pond—but most commonly they are associated with a tree or grove of trees with the tree embodying the local god or goddess (Huylar 1951: 105).

Adornment of sacred trees as a form of veneration has been particularly strong in southern India where the pipal and the neem trees are of special religious value. These trees were considered sacred and called *vriksha devata* because they symbolised fertility and longevity. Even after temples were built, these trees were worshipped and venerated in the temple grounds, as *sthalavrikshas* (as a Sanskrit word *sthalavriksha* can be broken down into *sthala*, meaning sacred place, and *vriksha*, meaning tree—see Amirthalingam 2005: 36). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *sthala puranas* were written about each temple. Each *purana*

emphasised the sacred characteristics of the particular tree and river of the place. In fact, it was believed that the sacred tree, or *sthalavriksha*, was as important as the deity (Amirthalingam 2005: 16).

Today we can still see instances of a sacred tree preceding a temple. Initially people gather under the chosen tree and slowly begin to decorate it by placing offerings at its base and tying cloth, braids, rings, bells, and an assortment of other decorative items around its branches, making the tree a place of worship. Over time the offerings become more valuable as people recognise the growing power of the site through the veneration. A priest or chosen person will be appointed to attend the site, and to accept offerings that are of value. Devotees start to give monetary offerings as they want to gain favour with the deity, until finally there are enough funds collected to build a temple. Because Hindus often anthropomorphise their gods, the concept of the temple is to house the god next to or around the sacred tree.

When a certain tree has been deemed sacred, devotees will travel to the site and offer gifts to the tree in order to ask the presiding deity to grant a wish. These trees become known as wish-fulfilling trees or *kalpavriksha*. Important to Indian people of diverse traditions, *kalpavriksha* are trees that are believed to grant all wishes: 'It is the symbol of mind, where *Kalpa* signifies thought or idea. What one wishes under the *Kalpavriksha* tree, one obtains' (Sinha 1979: 43).

Albertina Nugteren (2005) lists a number of reasons why a tree may be designated as a wishing tree. First, some trees may have been chosen for the 'gifts' they give, such as shade, medicine, food, drink, charms, or shelter. The tree may have been considered to have special leaves or fruits with magical qualities. Second, she suggests that some trees are believed to store wealth between their roots and branches. This wealth, which could include gems, coins, and gold, is believed to be guarded by *yakshas*, *nagas* (snakes), or the god, Kubera. Third, the tree is believed to house a wish-fulfilling deity, either male or female. When a devotee makes a wish, they invoke the deity by name and offer words of praise and gifts. Finally, some trees are thought to have branches of gold, silver, and beryl, and to have the ability to produce milk, water, clothes, ornaments, or magical fruits that would grant the eater immortality (Nugteren 2005: 41).

Sacred groves normally include more than one tree and can incorporate an entire forest. They can range from one square metre to about two million square metres. They are known under different names in different parts of the country, such as *kavu* in Kerala, *kovilkaadugal* in Tamil Nadu, *mawflong* in Assam and Meghalaya, *deorai* in Madhya Pradesh, *devarkadu* in Goa, *orans* in Rajasthan, *mangaon* or *ghols* in the

Western Ghats, *sindhavana*, *devrakadu* or *pavithravana* in Karnataka, *devarai* or *deoban* in Maharashtra, *sarnas* in Bihar, and *sarana* or *jaherthan* in Jharkhand (Amirthalingam 2005: 124). In Kerala, in India's south, trees are considered the protector of the deity and are called *Bhooda Gana*, which means 'the army of the gods'. Many of the sacred tree groves in Kerala cover large areas of land, all of which are deemed to be sacred and thus protected. The Iringole Grove, for example, comprises 64 acres of forest and, according to the Kerala Forests and Wildlife Department, the *kay*u of Kerala are all devoted to the goddess Durga or the serpent god Naga or Shasta (Kerala Forests and Wildlife Department 2009). Devotees believe that the sacred tree grove, or *kavu*, is the property of their god and that trees serve the gods like soldiers would. It is taboo to remove anything from a sacred grove in Kerala; even fallen trees or branches are left to rot and must not be removed, thus preserving the forest. As a result, the sacred grove has become a unique example of in situ genetic resource conservation through the involvement of local people in the most economic and efficient manner (Kent 2009: 4).

Trees and groves are venerated in India for a wealth of reasons and desires, but many of these represent phases in the life-cycle and have been connected with rites of renewal, sexuality, fertility, conception, birth, initiation, death, and rebirth (Cook 1974: 105). Their worship also coincides with local and personal requirements. People may venerate a tree to pacify the tree spirits and to give offerings to the tree deities; to appease an ancestor's spirit; to commemorate a death or marriage; and to achieve good health, healing, or general blessings. Women may venerate a tree in the belief that it will help them to find a husband or conceive a child, while farmers believe it will assist with the fertilisation of the land. In Rajasthan, local women adorn the *asvattha* tree to ward off widowhood (Malla 2000: 70). An array of such examples is provided in the following field notes (accompanied by photographs), demonstrating the myriad ways in which trees have been incorporated into spiritual and social rituals through their decoration.

### *In the Field with India's Sacred Trees*

Starting from Tamil Nadu (in the southern tip of India) and working toward India's north, the following account contributes modestly to the growing discourse on sacred trees in the contemporary Indian landscape. Field studies of sacred trees in South India (Freeman 1999; Kent 2009; Walter 2015) and North India (Haberman 2013) by other non-Indian scholars have provided in-depth historical, anthropological, and ecological commentary. This piece is motivated by my ethical interest in



environmental preservation, aesthetic interest in decoration as a religious art form, and my reflections upon my layered positionality—as a researcher, artist, conservationist, and a visitor—affected by India’s sacred trees. Combining observation and reflection with traditional knowledge garnered from locals and pilgrims as well as comparative research, these notes offer additional information and perspectives on Indian tree rituals. The historic and contemporary practice in India of venerating the tree through decoration has, over time, affected cultural and transcultural change. The tree is perceived differently as a form that houses the sacred and is thus protected. Furthermore, it becomes a signifier of an ancient religious form for those outside its context, an ecotheological marker whose effect on the viewer, though not tied to its cultural genealogy, can be nonetheless powerful.

#### *Fertility, Protection, and Healing Trees in Tamil Nadu*

In Tamil Nadu, the neem tree is considered feminine and the pipal, or bodhi tree, also known as the *arasu* (meaning ‘king’) tree, is considered masculine (Walter 2015: 54). People deliberately grow these two trees together. Once the trees are grown, women perform a ritual by circling them three times in order to find a husband or to become fertile. Traditionally, married women in India wear a gold necklace that displays the Hindu symbol of a goddess. If a married woman cannot afford gold, she wears a yellow cord with a piece of yellow turmeric root tied to the bottom. This marriage cord is called a *thali*. Young girls believe that if they hang a thali onto a sacred tree that they will find a husband and will marry soon. Another decoration found on fertility/marriage trees are yellow cords with pieces of cloth tied at the end. This signifies a ritual performed by women who have not been able to produce a child after marrying. The cloth, which sometimes contains items such as limes and flowers, is symbolic of a baby’s cradle with the childless woman praying for conception.

Located on the road that encircles the sacred mountain at Arunachala in Tamil Nadu (called Pradhatchana Rd, or Hill Round Road), I discovered a sacred neem tree, a kalpavriksha that was decorated by women who wished for a husband or a child. Hundreds of marriage thalis and symbolic cloth cots were tied to the tree. I was told that this neem tree (Fig. 1) is always full after a special celebration at Arunachala when pilgrims do *pradakshina*, or the circumambulation of the mountain.





Figure 1. Fertility and Marriage Sacred Tree, Arunachala, Tamil Nadu. Photograph by author.



Figure 2. *Sthalavriksha*, Kapaleeswarar Temple, Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Photograph by author.

Within the grounds of the Kapaleeswarar Temple in Chennai, the sacred tree, or *sthalavriksha* (Fig. 2), has become used for marriage and fertility rituals. If a woman marries and does not bear a child after a year, she performs a ritual whilst praying to the tree deities to ask for fertility. The

sthalavriksha in temple grounds often displays sophisticated cots that are made of wood and house a small baby doll. These cots can be purchased in small shops outside the temple along with other offerings that will be used in the temple. The gifting of these items to the tree has become so popular that the local priest must remove the decorations occasionally to clear space for new gifts. This does not deter devotees. Slowly new decorations begin to appear and so the process continues. The performative aspect of the fertility ritual involves the circumambulation of the tree shrine three times by the women who have applied pigment to the tree and to themselves completing the ritual with the gifting of the little wooden cot.

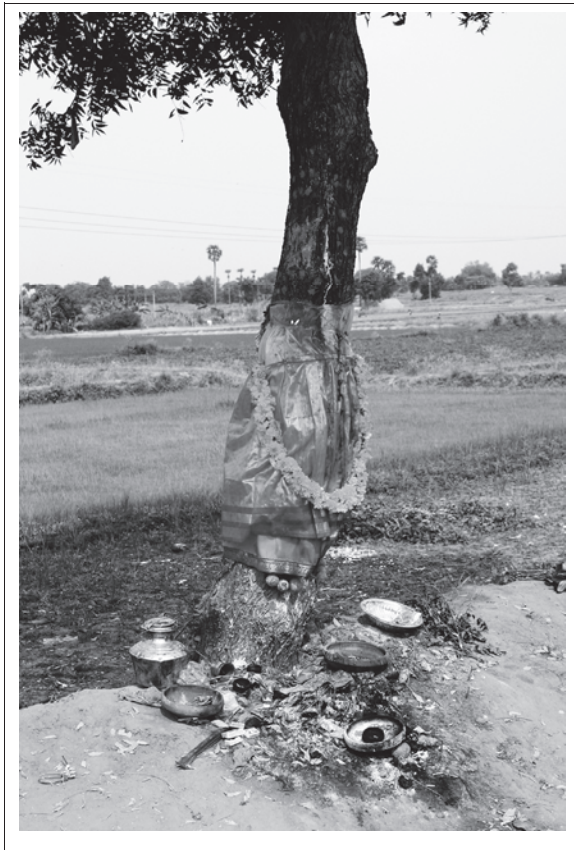


Figure 3. Sacred tree to the goddess MaariAmman, Tamil Nadu. Photograph by author.

If a tree displays a certain characteristic that may be construed to resemble a particular god or can be taken as a sign for the presence of a deity, the tree will be worshipped as representing that god or their abode. These signs may come in the form of a growth on the tree that is seen to depict a god; for example, a growth that may resemble the trunk of the elephant-headed god, Ganesh, or the oozing of sap signifying the milk of a goddess, as happened to a tree in the middle of a rice field near the village of Kilkatchirapattu in Tamil Nadu (Fig. 3). The white sap seeping from this unassuming tree was believed to be the lactations of the South Indian Hindu mother goddess, MaariAmman. People began to perform *pujas* or prayers to the tree in the belief that it embodied this popular goddess. By the time I visited this site, news had spread, and the tree had been appropriately dressed in a sari, with numerous people traveling long distances to worship it. Devotees informed me that women, in particular, worship at this tree, generally on a Tuesday, to ask for a husband, a child, or the solution of a problem that may be occurring in the family. One woman I spoke with had travelled hundreds of kilometres to ask the goddess for help.

In Hindu mythology, the goddess MaariAmman or simply Amman (meaning 'mother') and her warrior, Ayyanar, are believed to ride around the villages at night, protecting the locals from harm. As a result of this belief, locals place life-sized terracotta sculptures of Ayyanar and his warriors, or spirit attendants, along with their horses at the base or near the trees (Fowler-Smith 2009: 46; Walter 2015: 49). Every village has a sacred grove, or *kovilkaadugal* in Tamil Nadu, which is a protected area of forest at least one acre in size, associated with local folk deities. These groves generally have a shrine to Amman, several male attendants known as *veeran* figures, a sculpture of Ayyanar with his terracotta horses, and elephants, bulls, and sometimes other animals, all resting under or beside the trees (Fig. 4). These figurines are votives gifted to the gods in the hopeful return of good harvest, health, and protection (Amirthalingam 2005: 11).

As a tradition of the ancient Dravidian religious system, the shrines are always found in rural areas and trees are an essential component. The local priest is the potter of these terracotta sculptures performing the ritual of the creation of the figures as well as the worship at the temple before the clay figures are offered to Ayyanar and the other deities. These priests belong to the Indian caste known as *Vishwakarma* or 'creator of the world' (Amirthalingam 2005: 14). Art and religion are inseparably linked for the artist-priests who create these intricate sculptures, with the traditional skills being handed down from father to son over hundreds of generations.



Figure 4. Puttupattu Nature Temple and Grove, Tamil Nadu.  
Photograph by author.

Across India trees are often associated with healing, both physical and spiritual, and protection from evil spirits. The Indian mimosa tree, for example, is believed to provide protection against the 'evil eye'. Similarly, the placement of a branch from a neem tree is believed to ward off smallpox thought to be caused by the goddess Sitala Mata. The neem tree, revered in many parts of India, is also alleged to be the dwelling place of deities that relate to disease. It is considered to have multiple utilitarian purposes and all parts of the tree are utilised in ayurvedic treatments (Malla 2000: 57).

In the state of Tamil Nadu, if a person is afflicted with a disease such as measles or chicken pox it is thought that MaariAmman is present (Walter 2015: 49). To cool the body, yellow turmeric powder is applied to the afflicted person, and neem leaves, representing the power of the goddess, are used to sweep away the physical and mental sickness. It is believed that the neem tree eliminates negative elements from the ethereal body. If a child is sick with measles, a bed is made out of neem leaves and the leaves are displayed above the front door to warn potential visitors. Turmeric powder is also placed in a pot of water with neem leaves floating on top so that when people do visit they perform a ritual that involves taking the neem leaf and sprinkling the yellow turmeric water on themselves. They trust that this will make them immune to the disease. It is interesting to note that the Sanskrit name for the neem tree is *Arishtha*, which means 'reliever of sickness'. With more than 135 compounds being isolated from the plant, the importance of the neem



tree has been recognised by the United States National Academy of Sciences (National Research Council 1992).

On Tuesdays and Fridays people with measles visit the Pudupolayam Temple outside Tiruvannemalai in Tamil Nadu to pray for a cure from MaariAmman. At the base of the sacred tree is a stone covered with yellow turmeric powder. Near the stone is a white figure covered with red dots, representative of someone afflicted with measles (Fig. 5). The tridents placed around the tree are the tools of MaariAmman gifted, alongside bangles, to the goddess and to this nature temple in gratitude for the devotee's recovery.



Figure 5. Healing Tree. Pudupolayam Temple, Tiruvannemalai, Tamil Nadu. Photograph by author.

### *Sacred Groves in Chhattisgarh*

The newly formed state of Chhattisgarh in Central India contains one of the most important tribal belts in the country. Known as the Bastar region, there are 2,800,000 adivasis living there, amongst which 29 tribes have been identified as primeval tribes, or *moolya adivasis* (Varsha 2005: 1). The Bastar people believe their deities reside in the jungles, hills, and rivers, roaming the land and the air. As a consequence, their places of worship are mostly found in the natural environment, with the deities represented by a stone slab, a tree, or a piece of wood or bamboo. For some religious groups, for example the Dhurwa of Bastar, it is believed that when a person dies their soul, or *jivom*, takes residence in a pipal or pikad tree, where it stays until the death anniversary, or *cutak*, is over (Thusu 1968: 164).



Figure 6. Tribal and Hindu site. Kohakapal, Chhattisgarh.  
Photograph by author.

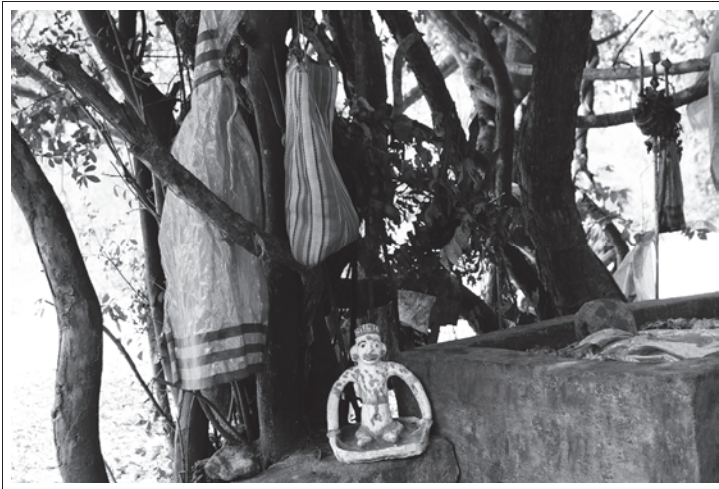


Figure 7. Sacred Grove to Balu Nag, Himachal Pradesh.  
Photograph by author.

The shrines for the Dhurwa people of Bastar are typically surrounded by bamboo fencing and are entered through a bamboo door, although sometimes they are inside a structure with a two-sloped thatched roof. Often these shrines include a swing (*ucal*) constructed with two upright posts and a horizontal crossbar from which hangs a wooden board covered with sharp, pointed iron nails, upon which the *sirah* (spirit

medium) sits while 'possessed' by the deity. It is believed that the *sirah* acts as the mouth-piece of the presiding deity, thus his words and answers to questions are believed. The shrine often also includes an earthen plinth under trees such as the sulphi, mahua, or mango, upon which may be found small stones (*shila*) and/or wooden posts (*kham*) along with carved stone images—all placed to symbolise the presiding deity of the shrine (Thusu 1968: 168). Another tradition for the Dhurwa people involves the build-up of earthen figures of horses, elephants, bulls, and human beings at the base of a tree, sometimes arranged in rows or simply piled on top of each other. Reminiscent of the ancient Dravidian tradition of placing terracotta sculptures of animals and deities at the base of a tree, these are the votive offerings made by devotees in fulfilment of a vow, as thanks for a wish that has been realised, or after recovery from an illness (Thusu 1968: 168).

In 2005, I participated in a research trip through the Bastar region courtesy of the Chhattisgarh Tourist Board. One of the first sites visited was near the village named Kohakapal, which has two sacred tree groves. At both sites, hundreds of terracotta animals rested at the base of a tree (Fig. 6). These animals act as protectors of the tree deity, quietly standing at their post observing the world around. As with many sacred tree sites in tribal regions, both tribal and Hindu people worshipped here with each contributing according to their religious traditions.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Jungle Deities in Himachal Pradesh*

At the temple of Balu Nag (Fig. 7), the trees represent the jungle deities called *Banshira* (which means the gods who control the jungle). In the middle of the forest is a huge *deodar* tree, a variety of the cedar tree, covered with metal objects. The deodar cedar is considered sacred in the Himalayas, its name meaning 'the tree of the Gods'. Groves of this tree have been planted near temples in both the Satlaj and Kulu valleys in Himachal Pradesh (Murray-Aynsley 1900: 113). The deity of the tree of Balu Nag is believed to give healing power to men and cattle (Sinha 1979: 84). Pilgrims typically donate metal tridents, hundreds of which now flank the tree. These 'Shiva tridents' leaning on the trunk represent male power, embodied in the god Shiva. If devotees cannot afford a metal trident they simply leave other objects made of metal such as saucepans. My guide informed me that a festival called *Panjo* occurs in August each year, at which time a ram is sacrificed, with generally two to three thousand people in attendance.

2. I was told by the local priest or 'Pujari' that the tribal names for the sacred trees at this site are Kendu and Buldora.



*Groves and Temples, Odisha*

While the pipal and banyan trees are considered sacred in most parts of the eastern, western, and northern parts of India, the banana tree is venerated in Bengal, the walnut tree in Kashmir, and, in the north-eastern region, the bamboo is considered very auspicious. The bamboo tree relates to the rice plant because it replaced rice as the staple diet in times of drought. The flowers of the bamboo were used like rice and the shoots could also be eaten. People used to worship the rice plant, so, over the centuries the bamboo came to be worshipped as an alternative (Murray-Aynsley 1900: 113). A prime example of a bamboo grove can be found in the Damanjoei region of Odisha, formerly Orissa, on the eastern coast of India. Hidden from the main thoroughfare and at the end of a narrow bushy dirt path, this sacred grove is dedicated to the deity that was thought to reside here, Ma Kantabausani. An auspicious sacred site for the local people, the bamboo had been ornamented with bells, ribbons, flowers, red and gold cloth, and countless terracotta pots, horses and an array of other paraphernalia left as gifts for the deity (shown in Fig. 8).



Figure 8. Sacred Bamboo Grove to Ma Kantabausani, Odisha.

Photograph by author.

For the performance of *havana* or *homa*, the Vedic fire ceremony, the twigs of five species of tree are used, the banyan, bilva, mango, *pakor* (*Ficus lacor*), deodar and *chandana* trees, although mango twigs are preferred. Bamboo is associated with the Brahmin thread ceremony and for the worship of ancestors. Leaves of mango, *ashok*, and plantain are the most

common materials for decorating places for sacred rituals and for festivals. The coconut or a fruiting branch of the *supari* (areca nut palm) is also commonly used. Worship at or to trees such as the mango, the bamboo, and the coconut tend to be more ancient forms of tree worship that relate to tribal groups. This usually stems from their practical use in a particular region. Regional variation of tree veneration depends upon the general ecology, environment, and availability in a particular area.

On one of the main roads leading out of Bhubaneswar, Odisha, there is a sacred tree temple dedicated to the 'traffic' goddess, Bata Bhuasuanhi. Upon enquiry I was told that originally there had been a small shop at this site. People would stop to make a purchase and then take time to pray at the nearby tree for a safe journey on a road that was considered notoriously dangerous. The gradual build-up of gifts acted as a solicitation for the local priest to sanctify the tree and eventually led to the building of a small temple around the tree. This temple also demonstrates an example of how a sacred tree becomes an integral part of a temple, literally growing through the structure with its limbs perforating the roof (Fig. 9).

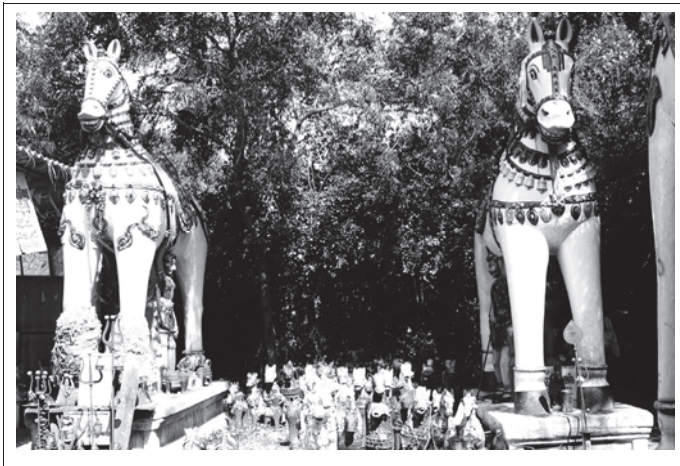


Figure 9. Sacred Tree to the 'Traffic' Goddess Bata Bhuasuanhi, Odisha.  
Photograph by author.

#### *Death and Immortality in Gaya*

The banyan or *pinda*, a signifier for renewal, is also considered important in rituals pertaining to death. It is believed at the town of Gaya in Bihar that the Buddha preached the essence of life and Vishnu preached the reality of death. According to local legend, the god Vishnu blessed Gaya with the power to absolve sinners. Hindus traditionally travel to the

Vishnupad Temple in Gaya to honour their parents a year after death and to liberate the wandering souls to a more heavenly state of *moksha* (Singh 2011: 213). The ‘immortal’ banyan tree (Fig. 10) stands in the courtyard of the temple, which is where the final rites for the dead are held. This is an impressive fig tree that even without adornment commands a sense of quiet grandeur, providing shade, peace, and tranquility to devotees who carefully tie devotional cloth, flowers, and beads to the elaborate aerial roots. In order to be allowed entrance to this temple I was asked to undertake a ritual for a recently deceased ancestor, ensuring peace in their afterlife. The ritual, which lasted over an hour, included my promise to give up one particular fruit for the rest of my life as an act of devotion.



Figure 10. The Sacred *Pinda* Tree, Vishnupad Temple, Gaya.  
Photograph by author.

### *Re-Cognising the Sacred Tree*

Across India hundreds of thousands of sacred trees are adorned and adored for various reasons and in various ways. Most of these have been venerated for centuries, often leading to the preservation of these trees and the ecosystems around them (Khan, Khumbongmayum, and Tripathi 2008: 282-83). In many cases, sacred groves are protected against logging and even the removal of dead wood or leaves may be considered taboo (Gadgil and Vartak 1976: 159; Chandran and Hughes 1997: 417-18; Ormsby 2013: 190-91). However, India’s relationship with ecological conservation is socially, religiously, and politically complex and

contradictory (Gold and Gujar 1989; Tomalin 2004; Kent 2009; Notermans, Nugteren, and Sunny 2016). While sacred groves are ultimately shrinking, mass tree-planting ventures are also being undertaken, and tensions and shifts between religious ideologies—from the hegemonic conservatism of Hindutva advocates to pockets of Christianity, ancient tribal practices to the secular-minded youth populations—add to the overall convoluted nature of the discussion (Baviskar 1999; Ormsby 2013; ABC 2017). We cannot conflate the history of animism in India and continued veneration of trees with a pan-Indian or Hindu ecotheological mentality, as Emma Tomalin frankly states:

Although the concept of bio-divinity easily finds support from within the Hindu tradition, there is an immense difference between the priorities and concerns of the modern environmentalist and the world-views of much earlier Hindu sages, poets, and philosophers. Moreover, one must also question the extent to which Hindus in modern India, many of whom have little or no knowledge of the language and concepts central to contemporary environmentalist thinking, actually share the religious environmentalist's goal of ecological sustainability. (2004: 267)

While it was evident to me in my travels and engagements in India that, despite the aforementioned hurdles, trees retain and gain religious significance, I want to turn now to some reflections on adornment and the effect of these decorated trees on witnesses who are also outsiders, such as myself.

Decorated trees act as signifiers, taking the viewer back to an ancient form of veneration and marking the integration of the human and the non-human in the act of sacralisation. Having travelled through ten states of India it became increasingly clear that decorating the tree for the purpose of ritual or worship is widely practiced, with numerous aesthetic variations, throughout the country. As an artist, the confluence of the aesthetic-sacred value given to a tree through ornamentation was of immediate fascination to me. Decoration, whether through the application of pigment to the bark, the tying of ribbons, string, cloth, bells, bangles, cradles, flowers, bangles, beads, chains, and locks of hair to the branches, or by placing statues and votive paraphernalia at the trunk, is an offering that makes the tree a channel between the worshipper and the deity. Rana P.B. Singh notes that through these actions the sacred tree functions as the *axis mundi*—religious studies theorist Mircea Eliade's famous paradigm of the 'cosmic pillar' that connects the realm of the human to that of the divine (Singh 2011: 228-29; Eliade 1987). The aesthetic worth of the enhanced tree is thus essential to its valuation to people who venerate it (Nugteren 2005; Kent 2009).

To walk through the natural environment of India and stumble across one of these transformed trees can be a profound experience for the beholder even if they are more tourist than pilgrim (Fowler-Smith 2009: 44). During my fieldwork, it occurred to me that, as a non-Indian, I had started to perceive the trees differently and it was the aesthetic enhancement that persuaded me to re-cognise these natural forms. Personal encounters with nature, especially at its most sublime, have often been quoted as watershed moments in the lives of individuals who become, like myself, conservationists and devotees of the environment (Milton 2002: 62-63). Certainly, I am not the first researcher to be struck by the aesthetic effect of India's sacred trees: Ann Grodzins Gold declares that her 'original inspiration...was essentially a visual one' (1989: 211). But studies on the relationship of aesthetics to ecology, philosophy, and psychology have shown that these experiences can translate not only into sacralisation in the sense that nature is incorporated into a pre-existing religious system, but also into a more broadly understood association of nature with sacrality and a holistic vision of how human and nonhuman intertwine in this worldview.

For example, Professor of Psychology Ruth Richards outlines at least six ways in which encountering beauty in nature can affect the respondent, including reminding people of the awesomeness of 'bounded infinity' and experiencing humility; witnessing the 'borders of change' and understanding the dynamism of life; finding familiar nature's 'resonant structures'; feeling a sense of 'belongingness' and interconnection; finding 'doorways to the transcendent'; and, discovering a 'greater awareness' of one's self (2001: 89). According to Richards, the result of the aesthetic effect can be ethical action: a renewed relationship with nature and a desire to protect it. Richards says:

*Aesthetic appreciation can bring us new hope; it can entice and please us while raising our awareness of our surrounds, our interconnection, our nature as open systems, and our coevolution with all that exists; out of this renewed sensitivity may be born both caring and responsibility. (2001: 90, italics in the original)*

That the natural forms of the trees discussed here have been decorated by humans does not diminish their profundity, but rather they become nature-based art forms, manifesting in brightly coloured and intricate ways the sacred connection between humankind and the environment. Again, this realisation is not limited to one religious or cultural context and, as the environmental philosopher Tony Lynch notes, the universality of art-making emphasises this for the viewer:



When we look at the aesthetic objects of other times and cultures, even while we recognise that they are alien to our own traditions, we do not think either that these objects are not aesthetically valuable, nor that they are, in some way, in real conflict with our own... It is in art, in fact, that we find the idea of a reality on which there are many perspectives and vistas the most natural and appealing. (1996: 157-58)

To further engage with the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in the conservation and sacralisation of trees, the photographs I have taken during my fieldwork in India (such as those used in this article) have become part of a wider project called the Tree Veneration Society. As part of our mission statement, the Society frames itself as 'an environmentally focused artistic collective that honours the beauty, power and the importance of trees'. It intends to foster a transcultural space for the adoration of trees, as the website notes:

The Tree Veneration Society aims to re-contextualise the historical practice of the worship and veneration of trees across nearly all cultures into a progressive contemporary community art project. While being environmentally conscious of the value of trees, particularly in inner-city suburbs, they also hope to bring some sense of the ritual created in forming a cross-cultural celebration of nature. (Tree Veneration Society 2017)

In agreement with the comments of Richards and Lynch above, J. Baird Callicott has said that beauty has tended to be more important than duty when it comes to conservation, and so 'a sound natural aesthetic is crucial to sound conservation policy and land management' (1994: 169-70). Hence, it is the interest of the Society to draw on examples of beauty in nature, such as the embellished trees of India, to activate this connection between aesthetic effect and ecological endeavours and to promote, in the process, a global appreciation of the sacred importance of trees. This can be seen to breathe new life into the conception of the tree as an *axis mundi* as it connects not only the realms of the human to that of the divine, but also has the potential to connect all humanity to one another, to nature, and to transcendent experiences.

### Conclusion

The tradition of sacred trees and groves in India has been dated to its pre-agricultural, hunting and gathering era (Khan, Khumbongmayum, and Tripathi 2008: 280). Since these ancient times, the people of India have preserved trees and groves for centuries, considering them symbols of vitality, welfare, and wellbeing, and believing that deities reside within them, protecting the surrounding villages and land from harm. In

modern times, programs of deforestation have led trees to gain significance as markers of anti-urban, anti-consumerist, anti-industrial, and anti-Western values (Rival 1998: 6; Baviskar 1999: 25-26). In my research trips, I witnessed how, in a country where wood is a valuable commodity, local communities would not allow the cutting of a sacred tree. I discovered numerous examples of roads having to be re-routed because of a sacred tree or of buildings being carefully constructed around a tree. The multiple examples given here show the diverse ways in which pious Indians interact with these trees and groves through beautification, ornamentation, ritual, and protection, to honour their gods and the manifestation of the divine in nature. While most scholars of India's sacred trees have looked at how these spaces have fared in this environmentally precarious country and its complex socio-religious relationship to nature, this article has opened the discussion to include reflections on the effect of their aesthetic value on non-Indian respondents.

Returning to the words of contemporary writer and environmentalist, Lucy Lippard, with which this article opened, in the contemporary era the environment has become a critical issue, with importance being placed on how humans view, understand, use, and respond to the environment. Many religious and spiritual traditions offer possible ways to establish a relationship between humans and the natural world based on mutual respect rather than the manipulation and exploitation attitude evident in current behavioural paradigms. If people see trees as separate from humans, they are less likely to honour and respect them, but through their sacralisation, in the dual process of adornment and adoration, they become beacons for the recognition of the environment as something that necessarily connects the human and the non-human.

### *References*

- ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation). 2017. 'India plants 66 million trees in 12 hours in record-breaking bid to meet Paris Agreement promise'. 9 August. Online: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-05/india-breaks-record-planting-66-million-trees-in-12-hours/8677302>.
- Amirthalingam, M. 2005. *Sacred Groves of Tamil Nadu: A Survey* (Chennai: C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre).
- Baviskar, Amita. 1999. 'Vanishing Forests, Sacred Trees: A Hindu Perspective on Eco-Consciousness', *Asian Geographer* 18.1-2: 21-31. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10225706.1999.9684045>.
- Bhajla, Neeraj, Tapan Mukherjee, and Gian Singh. 1984. 'Plants: Traditional Worshipping', *Indian Journal of History of Science* 19.1: 37-42.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 1994. 'The Land Aesthetic', in Christopher Key Chapple (ed.), *Ecological Prospects: Scientific, Religious and Aesthetic Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press): 169-83.



- Chandran, M.D. Subash, and J. Donald Hughes. 1997. 'The Sacred Groves of South India: Ecology, Traditional Communities and Religious Change', *Social Compass* 44.3: 413-27. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/003776897044003008>.
- Cook, Roger. 1974. *The Tree of Life: Image for the Cosmos* (London: Thames & Hudson).
- Eliade, Mircea. 1987. *The Sacred and the Profane* (trans. Willard R. Trask; New York: Harcourt).
- Fowler-Smith, Louise. 2009. 'Hindu Tree Veneration as a Mode of Environmental Encounter', *Leonardo* 42.1: 43-51. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1162/leon.2009.42.1.43>.
- Freeman, J.R. 1999. 'Gods, Groves and the Culture of Nature in Kerala', *Modern Asian Studies* 33.2: 257-302. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X99003261>.
- Gadgil, Madhav, and Vaman D. Vartak. 1976. 'The Sacred Groves of Western Ghats in India', *Economic Botany* 30.2: 152-60. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02862961>.
- Gold, Ann Grodzins, and Bhoju Ram Gujar. 1989. 'Of Gods, Trees and Boundaries: Divine Conservation in Rajasthan', *Asian Folklore Studies* 48.2: 211-29. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1177918>.
- Gottlieb, Roger S. 2004. *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2nd edn).
- Haberman, David L. 2013. *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India* (New York: Oxford University Press). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199929177.001.0001>.
- Hageneder, Fred. 2000. *The Spirit of Trees: Science, Symbiosis and Inspiration* (New York: Continuum).
- Huyler, Stephen. 1951. *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).
- Kent, Eliza. 2009. 'Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India', *Worldviews* 13: 1-39. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853508X394490>.
- Kerala Forests and Wildlife Department. 2009. *Sacred Groves*. 20 February. Online: [http://www.forest.kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=75:sacred-groves&catid=37:common-trees&Itemid=56](http://www.forest.kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=75:sacred-groves&catid=37:common-trees&Itemid=56).
- Khan, M.L., A.D. Khumbongmayum, and R.S. Tripathi. 2008. 'The Sacred Groves and Their Significance in Conserving Biodiversity: An Overview', *International Journal of Ecology and Environmental Sciences* 34.3: 277-91.
- Lippard, Lucy. 2006. 'Beyond the Beauty Strip', in Max Andrews (ed.), *Land, Art: A Cultural Ecology Handbook* (London: RSA and Arts Council, England): 14-15.
- Lynch, Tony. 1996. 'Deep Ecology as an Aesthetic Movement', *Environmental Values* 5.2: 147-60. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327196776679357>.
- Malla, Bansi Lal. 2000. *Trees in Indian Art, Mythology and Folklore* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International).
- Mascaro, Juan. 1965. *The Upanishads* (London: Penguin).
- Milton, Kay. 2002. *Loving Nature: Towards an Ecology of Emotion* (New York: Routledge). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203421413>.
- Murray-Aynsley, Harriet. 1900. *Symbolism of the East and West* (London: George Redway).
- Krishna, Nanditha, and M. Amirthalingam. 2014. *Sacred Plants of India* (Haryana: Penguin Books India).
- National Research Council. 1992. *Neem: A Tree for Solving Global Problems* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press).

- Notermans, Catrien, Albertina Nugteren, and Suma Sunny. 2016. 'The Changing Landscape of Sacred Groves in Kerala (India): A Critical View on the Role of Religion in Nature Conservation', *Religions* 7.38. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7040038>.
- Nugteren, Albertina. 2005. *Belief, Bounty and Beauty: Rituals around Sacred Trees in India* (Leiden and Boston: Brill).
- Ormsby, Alison. 2013. 'Analysis of Local Attitudes Toward the Sacred Groves of Meghalaya and Karnataka, India', *Conservation and Society* 11.2: 187-97. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.4103/0972-4923.115722>.
- Richards, Ruth. 2001. 'A New Aesthetic for Environmental Awareness: Chaos Theory, the Beauty of Nature, and Our Broader Humanistic Identity', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 41.2: 59-95. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167801412006>.
- Rival, Laura. 1998. 'Trees: From Symbols of Life and Regeneration to Political Artefacts', in Laura Rival (ed.), *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism* (Oxford and New York: Berg): 1-36.
- Singh, Rana P.B. 2011. 'Ritualscapes of Gaya, the City of Ancestors', in Rana P.B. Singh (ed.), *Holy Places and Pilgrimages: Essays on India* (New Delhi: Shubhi): 207-39.
- Sinha, B.C. 1979. *Tree Worship in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Books Today).
- Thusu, Kidar Nath. 1968. *The Dhurwa of Bastar—Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India).
- Tomalin, Emma. 2004. 'Bio-Divinity and Biodiversity: Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Conservation in India', *Numen* 51.3: 265-95. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568527041945481>.
- Tree Veneration Society. 2017. 'About Us'. 9 August. Online: <https://treevenerationsociety.com/2017/05/07/about-us/>.
- Varsha, R. 2005. 'Tribal Heritage of India', *INTACH Virasat* 1.4 (New Delhi: Dalip Mehta).
- Walter, Kurt J. 2015. 'Sacred Trees among the Tamil People of South India', *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 40.1: 47-65.