

Trees in Indian thought and art



The inception of the human being on the globe could not detach him from the broad influences exerted by the environment elements. His interaction with nature assisted him in living a much more comfortable and healthy life. It was only from his surroundings that he got food to eat, medicines to counter the baneful effects of diseases and shelter from inclement weather and last, but not the least, fuel to warm himself and also to cook for better relish. It was by these five utilitarian purposes of trees (*panca-yajna*) that man was led to seeing into the mysteries latent in them; may be the beauty of their flowers would have also excited his imagination.

As he held them in great reverence, he embarked upon the task of protecting the trees from any ravages. This action on the part of man unwittingly resulted in the ecological balance environment and man. That trees were divine and abodes of various gods led to a point where man dared not fell them or inflict hurt on them. Such trees were designated as *Brahma-taru*. Some trees were given out to sustain life by the sap present in them (*Jivana-Vrksa*). Then, there were trees declared of medicinal value thereby earning man's tremendous reverence (*Rogi-taru*). Even the Buddhists and Jainas recognised divine concept of trees. The notion of *caitya-vrksa*, *bodhi* trees, *Kevala vrksa* gained popularity among the Buddhists and Jainas. In Brahmanical Hindu religion vata (shorea-robusta) was identified with Siva, asvattha (ficus-religiosa) with Visnu, lotus with Surya and nine leaves of nine trees (*nava patrika*) were associated with nine different aspects of Durga. Visnu is the primordial man; when he wears a garland of wild foliage and flower, he is unites with nature, this unification of man and nature leads the creation to proceed. Siva wears *patra-kundla* on the right and *sankha kundala*, on the left ear, he is symbolised thereby as *ardha-narisvara* and known thereby as god of creation. In this connection, Kapila Vatsyayan opines that the vegetative, animal and human emerge from the first principle of world order i.e. seed and womb.

Archaeologically speaking, the nature of depictions in the paintings and artifacts of the prehistoric period do not allow us to conclude that the trees were worshipped in that period. But the excavations in other parts of India yield some artifacts which bear definite sign of tree worship during the chalcolithic period.

There are hundreds of references in the Vedic and post-Vedic literature where the glorification of trees were noted. In order to popularize this notion and in order to make an awareness regarding certain trees, the Indian artists carved them in stone, moulded them in terracotta, and painted them in colour, and reflected them in the narrative art of India. Interestingly, a notion of wishfulling trees and creepers (*Kalpa-Vrksa* and *Kalpalata*) also developed in Early Indian art and thought. Its conception seems to be a part of folk-cult. The trees and flowers do occupy an important place in the ancient Indian coins also. To V.S. Aggrawal, the tree symbol on the coins represents as a *Kalpa Vrksa*, which was churned out as one of the fourteen jewels from the ocean.

Tree faith seems to have gone through different stages. In the first stage, trees, plants, etc. would have been respected because of their aromatic nature, and natural growth which is apt to inspire awe and fear. Interestingly, we notice the association of spirits with trees, plants, flowers, leaves, etc. in the next stage. In yet another stage spirits yield place to deities, and the worship of respective deities. Finally, most of the trees, plants, leaves, etc. are believed to have magical properties and power to scare away evil.