

LEARNING FROM TRIBES: TREE WORSHIP AND CONSERVATION - A SHORT COMMUNICATION

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India, known for its rich biodiversity, also has diverse indigenous communities that add to its cultural heritage. States like Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, North Eastern states, Odisha, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh account for more than 80% of the tribal population in India. Each tribe has its own traditional practices, religious beliefs, festivals, and lifestyle. In spite of great cultural diversity among various tribes, nature worship is an integral part of each tribal society and worship of sun, moon, earth, and water is interwoven into their tradition. Tribes are also known to worship deities with local flowers and tree species. Religious sanctity is attached to trees like peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), neem (*Azadirachta indica*), banyan (*Ficus bengalensis*), bel (*Aegle marmelos*) and several others while Gods are offered special plants or plant parts. Trees like bel, rudraksha (seeds of *Elaeocarpus*) are associated with Lord Shiva, peepal with Lord Visnu, mango (*Mangifera indica*) with Lord Hanuman, and Asoka (*Saraca asoca*) with Kamadeva. Certain other common plants like Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*), generally offered to Lord Krishna, are a symbol of purity and are common in almost all houses. However, there are only a few reports where tribes are known to attach religious values to patches of wood or sacred groves known as saunas. A survey was carried out in Jharkhand (2015-16) under an Innovation Project sanctioned by University of Delhi, Delhi and two festivals of Munda tribe were observed to play a key role in the conservation of tree species.

Sarhul and Karma are two such examples where tribes worship trees over a week-long festival marked by gaiety, music, and dance. Sarhul festival is celebrated with great fervor by the Santhal, Oraon, Ho and Munda tribe of Jharkhand. Celebrated on Chaitra Shukla Tithiya (March-April), this festival marks the beginning of New Year for the tribe. Sarhul literally means 'Worship of Sal' (<https://indroyc.com/2011/04/06/sarhul-a-tribal-festival-in-india/>). It also refers to the beginning of the year or SARHUL = SAR + HUL = Year + Set to commence. It is mentioned in Ramayana, where Rama was asked to pierce seven

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Sal trees in a row with a single arrow which was later used to kill Vali and Kumbhakaran (yousigma.com/religionandphilosophy/yuddhakanda-chapter67.html).

According to another mythological belief, Sal (*Shorea robusta*) tree has played an important role in Mahabharata. It is believed that Kauravas during Mahabharata were helped by Munda tribe and many sacrificed their lives in the battlefield fighting Pandavas. To distinguish the dead bodies of tribals from another corpse in the battlefield, former was covered with Sal leaves. It was later noticed that these dead bodies which were covered by Sal leaves did not decay while others decayed fast. The bark of Sal is a source of resin and is frequently used as ointment against skin diseases. It is also used to make astringent decoction against diarrhea. Sal is valued by all members of the community and great care is taken to preserve the trees. The festival begins by worshipping Sal trees known as 'Jaher' in the local language (meaning Sacred Grove) and collecting the flowers of the tree, which are then offered to the deity, Mahadeo or Lord Dharmesh (Personal communication). The first day of the festival is called 'updates' and the second day is called 'chengna-Kati'. Community food and feast, dance and music begin on the night of 'chengna-Kati'. This night is called Khaddi.

Karma, another festival tree species is observed by Munda, Oraon, and Baiga tribes of Jharkhand on Bhadon Purnima in August-September (<https://indroyc.com/2012/09/26/karma/>). The Karma tree, (*Mitragyanaparvifolia* (Roxb.)Korth)is worshiped as a symbol of Lord Vishnu, the lord of power and youth. People start preparing for the festival about ten days in advance. They collect branches, flowers, and fruits of the tree and bring them home for worship. Trees are planted and on the day of the festival, the branch of the Karam tree is placed in the center of the courtyard prepared with cow dung. It is worshipped as a symbol of God and Nature. Before placing the branch in the middle, it is washed with milk, and Handia (rice beer). The branches are garlanded and people offer flowers, curd, and rice. People worship these branches seeking blessings of the Karma Devata/Devi. After the pooja, celebrations begin with singing and dancing in praise of the tree. Every dancer especially the unmarried girls carry a branch of the tree which is smeared with rice powder and decorated with marigold flowers. The dancers wear a yellow flower of Karma tree behind their ear. After this, girls carry these branches to a nearby water body and strike them against water splashing it high up before immersing it in water. This is essentially done by the unmarried girls.

Such traditional practices are significant when plant species are being wiped off at alarming rates. World Wildlife Fund for Nature, has indicated that each year between 0.01 and 0.1% of all species become extinct (http://wwf.panda.org/about_our_earth/biodiversity/biodiversity/). It is important, therefore, that steps are taken in all possible directions to conserve our biodiversity. The resurgence of interest in sacred grove worship is important in situ conservation activity. Local people believe that trees are the abode of the deity, and therefore, felling them is like committing a sin. Since tribes are known to live in harmony with the environment, they resist any damage caused to it. In

Khunti district, Munda tribe has formed a 30-member committee – Jangal Bachao Samiti (JBS) of which 15 are women members. The primary job of the committee is to protect trees mainly Sal, Kendu, Karma and other useful trees from being felled (Alok K N Mishra| TNN | Jun 6, 2012, 02.25 AM IST). In another instance, women of Chakulia district, Jharkhand tie Rakhi to Sal trees in a nearby forest and establish a bond of being a custodian of their existence.

Taking lessons from traditional practices, activities such as Urban Tree festival and Tree Walk is being organized in states like Delhi and Bengaluru (timesofindia.indiatimes.com › City News › Bangalore News). To be more successful in our endeavors to save the environment, we must explore our traditional wealth; many simple ways may unfold helping us take significant steps towards conservation of biodiversity.

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Fig.A-C. Worship of Karma tree by Pandit, men, and women. Note the preparation of the sacred tree; it is decorated with rice powder and marigold flowers. D&E. The girls carry karma branches to the river and immerse them.

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