

Hindu Tree Veneration as a Mode of Environmental Encounter

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The nature of Visionary Fancy or Imagination, is very little known, and the Eternal nature and permanence of its ever Existent Images is considered as less permanent than the things of Vegetative and Generative Nature; yet the Oak dies as well as the Lettuce, but its Eternal Image and Individuality never dies but returns by its seed; just so the Imaginative Image returns by the seed of Contemplative Thought.

—William Blake [1]

When I came across a group of decorated trees at Palani in Tamil Nadu, India, I was immediately struck by their transformation. Their covering of golden yellow turmeric powder broadened and even changed my perception of this otherwise normal grouping of trees set amid the bush land, to encompass a sense of reverence and enchantment. As an Australian artist trained in the European tradition my research over the past two decades has focused on how other cultures, past and present, describe the land as a sacred place through their myths and stories. Since 2003 I have focused on the sacredness of trees. My encounters with venerated and sacred trees on field trips to India have led me to consider the argument that there is an aesthetic rationale for preserving the environment [2]. How we perceive and contemplate the land affects how we treat the land and ultimately how we live within it. We are less likely to honor and respect the land if we see it as separate from ourselves. This perception remains pertinent irrespective of how the land is ideologically managed across cultural divides.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: A WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

Many authors and artists have shown that respect for the environment is strengthened by the symbolic nature of images. William Blake (1757–1827), for example, understood the power of the imaginary. When he refers to the “imaginative image” he is alluding to a special way of seeing and perceiving, one that displays a sense of poetry, enchantment and connectedness with the natural world. Blake’s vision and artistry were shaped as the period we now call the “Age of Enlightenment” was ending, and yet his view offers a stark contrast to the predominant intellectual and philosophical fashions of that time. Contemporary science reflects the more prevalent notions of the 18th-century Enlightenment, which privileges a cult of reason, where the realm of the imaginary is relegated to an intangible illusion of reality: the unreal. Society today, particularly in the Western tradition, where technological advancement

is elevated, tends to emphasize the rational, to give credence to reason and sense perception as primary modes of experience, thereby displacing imagination as a prominent mode of perception and cognition. Despite this, imagined and illusory images have remained the purview of the artist [3].

In the late 1980s, art critic Peter Fuller recorded that he felt as though we lived in a world where art and nature had both “lost their meaning” [4]. The modern world had lost touch with ways of seeing, no longer encompassing archetypal myth, symbol and ritual, resulting, according to Fuller, in a “severing of connectedness” with the natural world [5].

This detachment, however, has not always existed. Ancient cultures, whether monotheist or polytheist, acknowledged the sacredness of the land. An important aspect of ancient nature worship was the veneration of the tree, and many cultures throughout history similarly revered trees. Considered sacred, the trees were dutifully protected and nourished. Over time the belief in the sacred tree “has left innumerable traces in ancient art and literature, has largely shaped the usages and legends of the peasantry, and impressed its influence on the ritual of almost all the primitive religions of the world” [6].

TREE VENERATION IN INDIA

The worship of trees occurred throughout Europe but declined with the rise of religions such as Christianity and Islam, which regarded such activity as pagan [7]. In India, however, Hinduism accepted local cults, many of which worshipped nature. The *Rsis*, authors of the sacred Hindu texts, understood the importance of preserving the environment, and reference is made to the divine quality of the natural world throughout these Indian scriptures. The early Hindu sacred texts, the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, make frequent reference to sacred trees, referring to them as the most important living forms on earth. This contributed to the gradual change of the cultural perception of the tree. Sacred trees may now be found throughout India. They are worshipped by tribal animists and are considered the abode of the gods by many other religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Adherents of some of these religions began to decorate the tree as an aspect of ritual or veneration.

In contrast, contemporary Western society has tended to relate to the tree (aside from its representation in painted landscapes) from either an economic or a conservation-

ABSTRACT

The author presents her encounters with venerated and Sacred Trees on field trips to India to affirmatively answer the question: Is it possible for the artist to change how we perceive the environment to the extent that people change the way they respond to and inhabit it? She argues that how we perceive and contemplate the land affects how we treat the land, and ultimately how we live within it. The paper goes beyond the economic or conservationist perspective, setting out the religious context with which the tree is perceived aesthetically in its natural environment. The practice of venerating the tree through decoration has, over time, effected cultural change in India. The tree is seen as a form that houses the sacred and thus is protected.

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Fig. 1. Sacred tree temple, Palani, Tamil Nadu. (Photo © Louise Fowler-Smith)

ist perspective. Deforestation is often defended because it provides employment and products, thereby assisting the economy. The “green” argument is that this is a short-term efficiency and that in the long term deforestation will lead to catastrophic consequences for the welfare of humankind and the planet [8]. These competing points of view vie for supremacy in the community, but there is a third perspective that parallels this dichotomy, one that this article sets out to support: the aesthetic argument, wherein the tree is perceived beyond its capture on canvas and instead is perceived aesthetically as an object to be adorned and subsequently adored. I argue here that the idea of society as separate from nature may be challenged through an aestheticism that enables a more symbolic vision of the natural world. This view is supported by my research into sacred trees and other potent examples discussed here that I witnessed in India.

Veneration of the tree in India is an historic and contemporary practice. The tree is perceived as a form that houses the sacred, and thus is protected. Even the most rapacious Indian businessman would not dare to cut down a sacred tree,

which is recognized through its adornment. To walk through the natural environment and stumble across one of these transformed trees can be a profound experience for the beholder, an experience that involves all the senses: This living art is available to all.

When I returned to the site of my original encounter with the beautiful turmeric-covered trees at Palani, Tamil Nadu (Fig. 1), I was told by the local priest that women would come to perform a “wishing for a husband” ritual at this nature temple. The ritual includes bringing gifts—small parcels of turmeric—with notes recording their wishes or the name of the local deity. By adorning the tree in this way people are adding a sacred dimension, a value that is neither economic nor environmental but aesthetic and spiritual. This ritualistic engagement broadens the way society approaches the tree. If this tree is destroyed the community not only suffers economically and environmentally but also loses a site of beauty and sacredness. One approaches the venerated tree with a sense of wonder and reverence, enabling a change of consciousness and recognition of kinship between the individual and the natural world. The decoration of the tree

heightens the effects of the imagination and its perception, changing our cognition of the tree as we embody it as an element within the realm of the sacred.

Trees are decorated in India for a wealth of reasons. Historically sacred trees have been connected with rites of renewal, sexuality, fertility, conception, birth, initiation, death and rebirth [9]. Throughout India, Hindu communities have their own individual deities, or *gramadevata*, “which are regarded as synonymous with the locality and everything within it” [10]. In general, the *gramadevata* is represented as a Mother Goddess, who in turn represents the earth, fertility, healing and protection. The deity is not visible to the local community, so a specific place or object is chosen to direct the act of worship. The *devasthanam*, 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 pond. These shrines are most commonly associated with a tree or grove of trees, with the tree embodying the local goddess [11]. Across the country hundreds of thousands of sacred trees are worshipped, so it is not surprising that the visual impact of these tree sanc-



Fig. 2. Sacred bamboo grove, Orissa. (Photo © Louise Fowler-Smith)

tuaries is as varied as the communities themselves.

A sacred tree often precedes a temple in Hindu communities. Initially people gather under the chosen tree, slowly beginning to decorate it by placing offerings at its base and tying cloth, braid, 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, until finally there are enough funds collected to build a temple. Because Hindus anthropomorphize their gods, the temple is meant to house the God next to or around the sacred tree.

In some instances, the tree becomes an integral part of the temple's architecture, literally growing through the structure, with its limbs perforating the roof, as in "Traffic Goddess" (Color Plate E). I discovered the sacred tree to the Traffic Goddess on one of the main roads leading out of Bhubaneswar, Orissa. In response to my questions, I was told that there had originally 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 for travelers. The gradual build-up of gifts served as a solicitation for the local priest to sanctify the tree and eventually led to the building of a small temple around the tree.

THE PROCESS OF VENERATION

The process of venerating the tree begins with the local priest, or shaman in the case of tribal culture, selecting the sacred tree. Generally, it is chosen through a ritualistic process that involves a trance, a dream or a vision that may be brought on through tantric practices. The banyan, pipal, neem and tulasi are among the trees and plants that all Hindus consider sacred. Other trees are only considered sacred in certain districts. Usually a reverential perception takes hold because a tree has a practical use in that particular region. The bamboo tree, for

example, relates to the rice plant because bamboo flowers and bamboo shoots replace rice as the staple diet in times of drought. Ancient people worshiped the rice plant. Over the centuries, as the value of the bamboo in hard times became clear, people began to worship it because it served as an alternative to rice.

Sacred tree sites are sometimes hidden from the main thoroughfares, making their discovery even more delightful. My inquiry into the existence of sacred tree sites in the Damanjoei region of Orissa led to a debate among a gathering of men at a nearby temple. They finally agreed that they would take me to a site that did not appear particularly special from the road. We walked down a narrow bushy dirt path, which eventually revealed an extraordinary site. Hundreds of bamboo plants were growing in such a way as to create a natural arch over an installation of bamboo covered with bells, ribbons, flowers and red and gold cloth, establishing a sacred bamboo grove. At the base of the bamboo and surround-

ing trees countless terracotta pots, horses and an array of other paraphernalia had been left as gifts to the deity that was thought to reside there, Ma Kantabausani (Fig. 2).

People venerate such trees to pacify the tree spirits and to give offerings to the tree dieties; to pacify an ancestor's spirit; to commemorate a death or marriage; or to achieve good health, healing or general blessings. Women 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 the fertilization of the land. In Rajasthan local women adorn the *asvattha* tree to ward off widowhood [12].

SACRED TREES: FERTILITY, RENEWAL AND HEALING

At Madurai in Tamil Nadu, the deity or *gramadevata* is believed to be the goddess Meenakshi, whose power is considered so great that "several kingdoms during the past millennia have owed their importance to her beneficence" [13]. Within the grounds of the Meenakshi Temple the sacred tree has become important in fertility rituals. If a woman marries and

does not bear a child after a year, she performs a ritual while praying to the tree deities to ask for fertility. Stone serpents, often associated with fertility, have been placed around the periphery of the sacred temple tree, along with offerings of small wooden cots (Fig. 3).

The performative aspect of the fertility ritual involves three circumambulations of the tree shrine by the women, who have applied pigment to the tree, to the snake sculptures and to themselves, completing the ritual with the final gifting of little wooden cots housing baby toy dolls. The resultant installation is a tree surrounded by sculptures and covered with toy cots, pigment, ribbons and string.

In Indian mythology the "feminine" plays an important role in the fertility of the land. It is believed that the tree deity is capable of fertilizing a barren woman, but the feminine deity plays equally an important role in fertilizing the trees and surrounding land [14] (Fig. 4).

It is possible to find life-sized terracotta horses and figures placed in a decorative fashion at the bases of trees in rural areas of Tamil Nadu. These are known as the Aiyandar horses and spirit attendants who ride with Aiyandar, god of

the natural elements and protector of the village boundaries. In the ancient Dravidian religious tradition, the shrines are always found in rural areas and trees are an essential component [15]. Art and religion are inseparably linked for the artists who create these intricate sculptures. The traditional skills are handed down from father to son.

I have found that the tradition of placing terracotta horses and figures at the base of trees is particularly strong in Tamil Nadu. At Saliyamanglam, 16 km from Thanjavur, I photographed a sacred tree that had ceramic horses and figures at its base (Fig. 5). A local Brahman described the sculpted men as Veeran figures, whose purpose is to escort Aiyandar. The horses are offered to the tree god of the local temple to protect the surrounding area.

The sacred tree, as a signifier of renewal, may also be important in rituals pertaining to death. It is believed in the town of Gaya in Bihar that the Buddha preached the essence of life and the God Vishnu preached the reality of death. According to legend, Vishnu blessed Gaya with the power to absolve sinners. Hindus traditionally travel to the

Fig. 3. Sacred temple tree, Meenakshi Temple, Madurai. (Photo © Louise Fowler-Smith)





Fig. 4. Fertility tree, Meenakshi Temple. (Photo © Louise Fowler-Smith)



Fig. 5. Aiyandar horses and attendants, Tamil Nadu. (Photo © Louise Fowler-Smith)

Vishnupad Temple in Gaya (Fig. 6) to honor parents a year after their deaths and to liberate their wandering souls to a state of nirvana [16].

The banyan or *pinda* tree, considered immortal by the people who worship here, stands in the courtyard of the Vishnupad temple, which is where final rites for the dead are held. According to legend, the Buddha meditated under a banyan tree. I was asked to undertake a ritual to a recently deceased ancestor before entering this temple, to insure my deceased relative's peace in the afterlife.

The Para Bhrama Temple at Ochira, in the Alappuzha district of Kerala (Fig. 7), is renowned as a site of healing. People go there specifically to worship the trees. There is no actual temple structure, simply three very large decorated trees—one to Vishnu, one to Bhrama and one to Maheshera.

Para Bhrama is the Indian version of Lourdes in France. Local legend states that the sacred trees that form the Para Bhrama Temple represent Parabrahman, the god without form. Wooden

votive healing sculptures surround the entwined roots of the ancient banyan, pipal and kadamba trees. Devotees use these sculptures to circle the part of their body that needs healing. A wooden image of the goddess Parvati also rests at the base of one of the sacred trees, and legend claims that many miracles have occurred here with the aid of this goddess [17].

After I had traveled through 10 states of India, it became clear that tree decoration for the purpose of ritual or worship is widely practiced, with numerous aesthetic variations, throughout the country. It occurred to me, a non-Hindu, that my experiences had altered my perception of trees. Thinking about my new way of seeing these living objects, I concluded that the aesthetic enhancement persuaded me to re-cognize these natural forms. This led me to ask whether it is possible for the artist to inspire a re-envisioning of the environment through the aesthetic; and whether sacredness could be transferred through artistic vision without transplanting any specific

religious ideology. Indeed, philosophers have investigated the importance of the aesthetic to humanity for centuries. For Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the aesthetic provided a promise of reconciliation between nature and humanity. Kant, who wrote, “Intuitions without concepts are blind; concepts without intuitions are empty” [18], also asserts that perception is based upon both experience of external objects and a priori knowledge.

REDISCOVERING SACREDNESS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Peter Fuller asserts that our response to nature is depleted and distorted when it is detached from the aesthetic, with a result that “impacts on the destiny of our culture and perhaps even our survival upon this planet” [19]. Authors such as Thomas Berry have suggested that the mission for the 21st century is to develop a new philosophical framework that can overcome the existing system of high consumption and high waste. Suzi Gablik, in *The Reenchantment of Art*, reinforces



Fig. 6. The sacred pinda tree, Vishnupad Temple, Gaya. (Photo © Louise Fowler-Smith)

Berry's message by suggesting that the challenge for the contemporary artist is to rediscover sacredness in the world and to initiate a new cultural coding for the ecological age that will aid in the development of an age of ecological awareness/concern. Gablik blames the Modernist art movement for the "severing of bonds with society" [20]. She calls for artists to meet the challenge of transcending the "disconnectedness and separation of the aesthetic from the social" [21] that she believes existed within modernism. She also states: "The effectiveness of art needs to be judged by how well it overturns the contemporary perception of the world that we have been taught" [22].

Although there have been many artists who have addressed issues around the environment in the past, particularly the land artists of the 1960s and 1970s, these practitioners have been a minority in the international art world. In more recent times, the public perception of art has not helped, with people in general considering art elitist and disconnected from important social issues of our time.

As we enter the 21st century, an increasing number of contemporary artists are accepting the challenge that climate

change presents to all of us. With organizations such as Leonardo/OLATS and discussion groups such as the YASMIN network specifically focusing on "the perception of climate change" [23], involvement in Europe and the United States is escalating. In Australia, exhibitions such as *The Trouble with the Weather: A Southern Response*, held in July 2007 at the University of Technology, Sydney Gallery, brought together a group of artists responding to the issue of climate change in the Southern hemisphere. In general, however, artistic response in Australia has been limited.

It has been suggested by many that we need to develop a more holistic way of being with the environment. This requires a change of consciousness in all of us in order to change our behavior towards the land. David Suzuki states that "eminent scientists are suggesting that science alone is not enough to solve the planetary environmental crisis and that we must recreate for ourselves a sense of place within the biosphere that is steeped in humility and reverence for all life" [24].

If artists are capable of capturing the essence of place, drawing our attention to

aspects of the land we may otherwise not have seen or contemplated and helping us to see with fresh eyes, then the question remains whether artists can help to change the cultural paradigm of how, for example, Australians perceive their land. This is particularly relevant in a country where a government skeptical of climate change recently approved an AU\$2 billion pulp mill. One hopes that the newly elected government will reverse this decision. Many Australians, however, still talk of "when the drought breaks" and are in denial about what type of land predominantly makes up this huge continent.

In a country where the desert is growing at an alarming rate, can the artist help the general population to perceive the environment differently, to the extent that people change the way they respond and live in it? This question is at the core of my current project [25]. My research in India has provided the impetus to see how the aesthetic enhancement of the tree in other countries has contributed to its protection. How we perceive and contemplate the land affects how we treat the land and ultimately how we live within it. As Blake put it, "The Imaginative Image returns by the seed of contemplative



Fig. 7. The Para Bhrama Temple at Ochira. (Photo © Louise Fowler-Smith)

thought.” Perhaps our challenge is to re-discover the “imaginative image”—a new way of seeing and being in the world.

Imagination is a tree. It has the integrative virtues of a tree. It is root and boughs. It lives between earth and sky. It lives in the earth and in the wind. The imagined tree imperceptibly becomes the cosmological tree, the tree which epitomizes a universe, which makes a universe.

—Gaston Bachelard [26]

References and Notes

Unedited references as provided by author.

1. W. Blake, “A Vision of the Last Judgment,” in *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, London, 1966, as quoted in R. Cook, *The Tree of Life: Image for the Cosmos* (Thames and Hudson, 1974) p. 7.

2. I have made two field trips to India to research and photograph the practice of decorating the tree as an act of veneration or worship. In 2003 I traveled for six weeks through Orissa, Rajasthan, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The resultant research encompassed tree worship and tree veneration in the tribal areas of Orissa, the sacred tree groves in Kerala, tree rituals in Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan. In 2005 I spent six weeks in India taking photographs, recording oral histories and interviewing anthropologists and botanists who specialized in the field. I recorded the practice of venerating trees in the states of Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhatisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. Both trips were funded by the *University of New South Wales (UNSW)*.

3. Cook [1] p. 7–8.

4. P. Fuller, *The Geography of Mother Nature*, in Denis E. Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design, and Use of Past Environments*, Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography; 9 (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 24.

5. Fuller [4] p. 11.

6. J.H. Philpot, *The Sacred Tree in Religion and Myth* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc. 2004) p. 1.

7. F. Hageneder, *The Spirit of Trees: Science, Symbiosis and Inspiration* (New York: Continuum, 2000) p. 56.

8. The argument of Climate Change is a subject of current debate. Studies have shown, however, that a significant percentage of anthropogenic (man-made) emissions of CO₂ are due to a change in land-use, especially deforestation. We know that trees absorb harmful greenhouse gases, making the planting and retention of forests essential to reducing global greenhouse gas emissions. The U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization, however, estimates that every year approximately 32 million acres of forests are destroyed, releasing tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and destroying biodiversity. For

more information see ‘New Years Resolution for the Environment.’ ProQuest Religion. Jan 15–22, 2007; 196, 2; p.4. Information can also be found at CSIRO Australia (2007, May 11). Confirmed: Deforestation Plays Critical Climate Change Role. ScienceDaily. Retrieved December 3, 2007, from <<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/05/070511100918.htm>>.

9. R. Cook, *The Tree of Life*. p. 105

10. S. Huyler, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1951) p. 102.

11. Huyler [10] p. 105.

12. B.L. Malla, *Trees in Indian Art, Mythology and Folklore* (New Delhi: Aryan Books, 2000) p. 70.

13. Huyler [10] p. 102.

14. Malla [12] p. 66.

15. R. du Bois, “Larger Than Life: The Terracotta Sculptures of India,” *Ceramics Today*, <www.ceramics-today.com/articles/clay_horses.htm>.

16. For more information see <www.manshi.in/piligrimage.html>.

17. Huyler [10] p. 213.

18. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [1781], trans. Norman Kemp Smith (N.Y.: St. Martins, 1965) A 51/B 75.

19. Fuller [4] p. 13.

20. S. Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991) p. 5.

21. Gablik [20] p. 5.

22. Gablik [20] p. 27.

23. J. Knebusch, “The Perception of Climate Change,” *Leonardo* 40, No. 2 (2007) p. 113.

24. P. Knudtson and D. Suzuki, *Wisdom of the Elders* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1992) p. xxiv.

25. The practical application of this research will be pursued in my role as a Director of the Imaging the Land International Research Institute at the University of NSW. ILIRI was established specifically to research the imaging of land and aims to promote new ways of perceiving the land in the 21st century.

26. R. Cook [1] p. 9.

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