



THE SPEAKING TREE  
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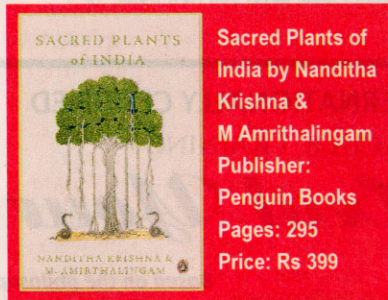
# Revering Her Creativity

**NANDITHA KRISHNA & M AMRITHALINGAM**

**S**acred trees form an important part of the ecological heritage of India. Most temples, towns, and villages — and sometimes even Muslim *dargahs* — are associated with trees. Some plants are sacred to the individual deity; others are sacred to the place... Several plants have been worshipped in India from time immemorial. Wherever the tulsi grows — from the Indo-Gangetic plains to the shores of the Indian Ocean at Kanyakumari — it occupies a position of pride in the central courtyard of the house, tended to, carefully, by the housewife.

Apart from the elaborate myths connecting it to Krishna, the tulsi plant has several medicinal properties.... To protect and revere this plant with so many medicinal properties, it was designated as sacred, a fitting tribute to its role in providing invaluable healthcare. The worship of plants is an ancient phenomenon in India. It is probably the oldest form of worship. The association of a single tree with a sacred *sthala* or *sthana* is reflected in the *chaitya vriksha* and *sthala vriksha* of literature and society....

When people turned to food pro-



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duction, the Mother Goddess or the Earth Mother became the chief deity. Fertility, creation, and the world of plants and animals became her blessings to her devotees. The worship of the tree was the adoration of her creative abilities, symbolising fertility so essential for the survival of the early people. Spirits — good or bad — were believed to reside in trees. If the trees were worshipped, then the resident spirits were pleased. As sacred forests were replaced by agriculture, a single tree was left and was designated as 'sacred' tree.

The earliest temples were little more than images placed under trees. Later, the tree and the image were enclosed by a fence made of wood, followed even by stone.... Numerous references are made in literature to trees as abodes of gods. They sheltered

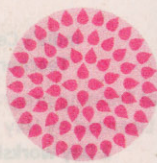
the object of worship; a deity, a fetish, a weapon, or any other. As the open-air shrine beneath the tree was replaced by a shrine or temple for the deity, the tree became the *sthala vriksha* of the temple....

There are many places named after sacred plants like Vrindavan, forest of the vrinda or tulsi, near Mathura in the north, or Kanchipuram, town of the kanchi or river portia tree, near Chennai in the south. Clans like Kaushika, Pallava and Kadamba were named after grass, leaf, and flower respectively.

Sacred trees are generally associated with Hindu deities, Jain *tirthankaras* and the Buddha. During the medieval period, each temple had its *sthala purana* or story of the sacred site written, which emphasised the sacred characteristics of the tree, and the water body associated with the temple.

Trees were revered for any one of four primary reasons: for their medicinal qualities, such as neem and tulsi; for their economic value, such as the Alexandria laurel used to build catamarans and ships off the Coromandel Coast; for their ecological importance, such as the mangroves in Chidambaram; and for their socio-cultural role, such as the banyan, the meeting place of the Bania or business community. ■

*Van Mahotsav will be celebrated in the first week of July*



**FESTIVE SPIRIT**