

## The nature of divinity



### BOOK REVIEW

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Plant worship is universal. There is no human civilisation or religious tradition in which plants do not figure since life on earth would not be sustained without them.

So while the cosmos in the myths of the Norse consists of Nine Worlds flanking the great tree *Yggdrasil*, a *Lote* tree, the *Sidrat al-Muntahâ*, marks the end of the seventh heaven in Islamic belief, a boundary that no creation can pass. Plants or their parts are also totems used in both spiritual and temporal

realms. The shamrock, used by Padraig of Erin, is the symbol of the Catholic Irish, while the English rose, the fleur-de-lis and the chrysanthemum are symbols of the royal houses of Tudor, Bourbon and Nippon respectively.

This book details similar linkages closer home, in South Asia, from the Stone Age to India today and the gamut of roles plants have played in religion, folklore and spirituality.

The book has two broad sections. Part one begins with a chapter on plant worship in the Mesolithic Era. Using diagrammatical sketches of rock art in the famous caves of Bhimbetka (Madhya Pradesh), the authors explain how plant worship began on the sub-continent with Early Man. The chapter also details the role plants played in the Indus Valley. There are a number of Indus Valley seals (most of which are reproduced in the book) that show that

two very different plants/trees were held sacred by Harappans: the *peepal* and the Indian mesquite or *shami*.

The following two chapters profile the role of plants in three distinct and yet overlapping traditions of India that are today collectively known as *Dharmic* faiths: Vedic religion (precursor to modern Hinduism), Jainism and Buddhism.

The sections on plant worship in the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Itihasa* (epics) and *Puranas* makes for fascinating reading. In the *Ramayana*, Sita was imprisoned on the island of Lanka in a grove of *ashoka* trees. And Rama used *darbha* or cotton-wool grass as a missile.

In the *Mahabharata*, Krishna grazed his cows in the forest of *vrinda* (*tulsi* or sacred basil) known as *Vrindavana* on moonlit nights. While doing so, he used to play his flute, made of bamboo.

The authors note that both Buddhism and Jainism "being offshoots of the Vedic religion, continued many of the earlier traditions". So each of the Jaina *Tirthanakaras* was associ-

ated with his own tree, under which he received *kevala* (special knowledge). The authors add that "while trees and flowers were profusely used as ornamentation by Jains, they were rarely regarded as objects of worship".

But it is Buddhism that the authors profile in detail, since the whole story of Siddhartha Gautama is associated with some tree or plant. Siddhartha was born under a *sala* (*ashoka*) tree in Lumbini. As for his enlightenment, while it is generally believed that it happened under a *peepal* tree, the authors inform us that the Buddha sat under three trees during the entire process: a banyan, an Indian oak and a wild mango. And when he attained *mahaparinirvana* at Kushinagara, it was again in a grove of *sala* trees.

While the focus is on the three main socio-religious traditions of ancient India, the authors do not ignore others. Both are gifted Tamilologists and include a section on plant worship among ancient Tamils. For instance, Dakshinamurthy, a widely worshipped

form of Shiva seated facing south under a banyan, is first mentioned in the famous Sangam epic *Silappadikaaram*. The tradition of sacred trees continued into the Middle Ages, and into faiths that either came to India or developed here during the time. The authors tell us that the tradition of tying sacred threads in the *dargahs* of Sufi *pirs*, in fact, developed from an older tradition. Most Sufis of the subcontinent used to live and meditate under trees and their followers would tie charms on the branches. When a Sufi died, he was buried under the tree and in time, a *dargah* would be constructed around the spot. Devotees would then tie the threads on the walls.

Sacred trees occupy a central place in Sikh practice, too, note the authors. This is evidenced in the famous Gurdwara Ber Sahib in the town of Sultanpur Lodhi near Kapurthala, Punjab. The shrine is built around a *ber* tree, under which the First Guru first chanted the *Mool Mantar*.

Part two contains profiles of 83

trees, shrubs, climbers and grasses that are held sacred in India. The guide follows a central scheme. A small box classifies the plant into one of four categories, gives its botanical name, names in Hindi, Tamil and Sanskrit, and its distribution. The main text is composed of "mythical and religious references" and "medicinal uses".

In an age when ecological biodiversity is rapidly shrinking, *Sacred Plants of India* is not only of interest to professional and amateur botanists, but more importantly could inculcate awareness about our botanical wealth in the new generation. At ₹399, it is quite affordable, too. The only sore point is the font. It is quite a strain on the eyes. Nevertheless, you would not mind squinting a little to read about green plants, would you?

### SACRED PLANTS OF INDIA

Nanditha Krishna and M Amrithalingam  
Penguin  
294 pages; ₹399