

# NANDANOM

## THE GARDEN OF GODS



PN RAVINDRAN





## **Notion Press**

Old No. 38, New No. 6  
McNichols Road, Chetpet  
Chennai - 600 031

First Published by Notion Press 2018  
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ISBN 978-1-64249-748-9

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Cover: Inverted Tree-painting by Dr. M. Shylaja. See p. 10 & 33 for explanation.

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## Tree worship

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*'The groves were God's first temples. 'Ere man learned  
 To hew the shaft, and lay the architrave,  
 And spread the roof above them,—'ere he framed  
 The lofty vault, to gather and roll back  
 The sound of anthems; in the darkling wood,  
 Amidst the cool and silence, he knelt down,  
 And offered to the mightiest solemn thanks  
 And supplication.....  
 With scented breath, and look so like a smile,  
 Seems, as it issues from the shapeless mould,  
 An emanation of the indwelling Life,  
 A visible token of the upholding Love,  
 That are the soul of this wide universe.*

Bryant (1)

It was quarter past nine in the morning when we reached Nandanom, the sacred plant garden maintained by the *ashram* (*ashramom*). The garden gate was an improvised one of bamboo splits; a hedge of small trees and shrubs extended to both sides from the gate.

“The protection is for keeping the wild animals away” said Ramji.

Then they sought permission to enter the garden.

*“Oh the presiding deities of the sacred garden of gods,  
 Grant us permission to walk on your soil  
 Give us your blessings  
 om s̄anthi s̄anthi s̄anthi hi”*

Alka Mai opened the gate slowly and entered the garden and we followed. As they entered they touched the soil in silent reverence, and I followed them.

“You are now in the sacred garden of gods. You are the first visitor to this garden at least to my knowledge. Treat the plants with reverence. We do not allow any photography in the *āshram* as we do not want any publicity and we certainly do not want to receive visitors coming here for their entertainment. Speak gently without disturbing the tranquility and serenity of this place.”

With these words she moved towards a mound of betel leaf plant just facing the entrance. Alka Mai was now praying, which she translated to me later:

“O, the *thambula valli*, the most sacred of all plants,  
Created by Lord Brahma from the sacred fire,  
And blessed by the Lord himself as the most auspicious one,  
O, the blessed one, you came to earth from heaven  
At the behest of Lord Mahesa,  
On your leaf reside all the gods and goddesses.  
Give me a leaf.”

She gently plucked a single leaf.

“Ram, give me the betel nut.”

Ramji dished out a betel nut from the pocket of his long saffron *kurta* and handed it to Alka Mai. She placed the betel nut on the leaf and reverently placed it on the ground below and prayed in silence for a minute.

The air was cool and the lingering mist floated in the air. A mild breeze wafted across the region. In the splendour of the sylvan setting, sublime solitude prevailed, but for the murmurings of birds and the rustling sound of leaves in the morning breeze. A sort of strange exhilaration filled my heart. Away from the fast moving modern world and all its ignoble strife, here I am in this serene, divine ambience of this *āshram*! It's great; it's wonderful, my mind filled with a prayer.

“Mai, why did you name this garden as *Nandanom*? “ I asked.

“Ravi, do you know what *Nandanom* or *Nandana vanom* is?. It is the mythical celestial garden of Lord Indra located in *Amaravathi*, the capital of *Indraloka* or *swarloka*, the heavenly world. When we wanted to name this garden, this was the name selected by our Yogini Maa, whom we consider as the soul of this *ashrom*. It is said that only those who have controlled their senses and practiced absolute non-violence are eligible to enter this garden.”

“OK. Now let us move to the *panchavadi* where we can sit and discuss.”

We moved to a nearby location filled with trees and in the midst there was an open circular lawn. We all took our seats there when Alka Mai began talking.

“Ravi, we are now feeling very much involved in your effort of documenting the myths, symbolism and lore of the sacred plants of our country. We feel that you are now very much a part of us. So let us go ahead earnestly.” She looked at others and every one nodded in approval.

“Right. First let me give a curtain raiser on tree worship in general, about which I read much during my study of cultural anthropology”

She was silent for a couple of minutes and then began to speak and I was ready with the recorder to catch every word that she spoke.

“Tree worship or dendrolatry, a term not used popularly now, and worship of natural forces evolved gradually along with the evolution of the human species and his social life. It is impossible to tell conclusively when and where the tree worship originated, as we have no historical, anthropological or archeological record. Stephen Oppenheimer in his book *Eden of the East*, put forward an argument based on the various evidences available that a tree-worshipping culture arose in Indonesia and that was diffused by the so-called

*Younger Dryas* event of about 12000 BP (before the present), when the sea level rose. This culture reached China (Szechuan), then India and the Middle East. Finally the Finno-Ugaritic strand of this diffusion spread through Russia to Finland where the Norse myth of *Yggdrasil* took root.(2). Probably humans might have started the worship of natural forces and trees from the very earliest times. Trees offered them protection from sun and rain and also from reptiles and carnivores that inhabited the forest land in those times. The trees yielded the fruits that sustained the birds, animals and humans alike. Probably the animals, like the squirrels, monkeys and apes were man's tutors; from them he might have learnt to distinguish the edible fruits from the non-edible ones. This theme of social anthropology is a very vast one; we will limit our discussion with special reference to India. [*Younger Dryas*' event: A climatic event dated back about 12900 to 11700 years before the present. It is named after a plant, an indicator genus, the alpine-tundra wildflower *Dryas octopetala* (Rose family, Rosaceae) the remains of which were discovered plentifully from sedimentary rocks of the period. *Yggdrasil*: In Norse mythology, it is an immense mythical tree that connects the nine worlds.]

In the Indian sub-continent, plant worship probably had its beginning in the pre-Indus Valley time but as a continuous stream of worship from the Vedic period and that is continued more or less uninterrupted even today as a vibrant faith in the Indian society. Excavations in Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro provided evidence of the existence of tree worship during the Indus Valley civilization. Marshall in his classical work on Indus civilization mentions two forms of tree worship during that period. In one form the tree was worshipped and in the other form the tree spirit was worshipped. Pandey in his work on the Indian Rock Art found in the Adamgarh, mentions the figure of a '*vanadeva*.' This figure is shown in an anthropomorphic form, with a lotus crown on his head, holding an arrow in one hand and a bud in the other, and the body covered with flowers. In one of the seals excavated from Indus Valley, the epiphany of the deity is a tree that resembles the peepal. In another seal, Mackay has identified a peepal, and in a clay amulet he found the representation of a neem tree. According to him the worship of Mother Goddess, the goddess of fertility and crops, seems to be central to the religious practices of that time. The Mother Goddess was often represented as rising between two branches of a tree or standing in between the bifurcated branch of a peepal tree. The pre-Vedic worship of trees evolved further and attained new dimensions during the Vedic period and in the post- Vedic times. The number of sacred trees increased considerably in the Puranic period and in the centuries that followed because of the proliferation of deities due to the polytheistic and iconoclastic worship. During the Vedic period *soma* occupied the prime status in worship. In *Rig Veda*, a whole chapter is devoted for extolling the qualities of *soma* and its worship. In subsequent centuries elaborate rituals were evolved for each sacred ceremony and in every such ceremony plants and plant products played important roles. *Puranas* such as *Garuda purana* and *Agni purana* mention how different flowers were prescribed for offering to different deities. In Hinduism, belief in astrology and the planetary influence on the lives of people are deep rooted. All gods and goddesses, the nine planets and the twenty-seven stars (birth stars that are associated with the birth of people) and the twelve zodiacs are associated with certain plants."

After a minute she continued:

"In *Matsya purana* there is a legend on the origin of plants. Marisha, the adopted daughter of Soma the Moon God, was married to the ten *rishis* known collectively as Prachetas and from their union Daksha prajapathi was born. Daksha was one of the *prajapathis* entrusted with creation by Lord Brahma. Daksha created innumerable plants including trees, as we see around us. There are some plants believed to have

originated directly from gods and goddesses, the first and the most well known one being the lotus that arose from the navel of Vishnu. The other cases include, *vilva* (*bel*, wood apple) from the breast of Lakshmi, *aśvattha* (peepal, pipal) from sun, *kunda* (jasmine) flowers from the palm of Parvathi, *Datura* (thorn apple) from the chest of Śiva etc.

When we analyze the religious development of the humans we can see five major stages:

- animism
- spiriticism
- polytheism
- monotheism
- pantheism

Primitive humans practiced animism, worshipped natural phenomena, animals and plants. Spiriticism is even now prevalent among tribes all over the world and it is similar to Shamanism, a term used widely now. Shamans are tribal spirit men and they are the link between their spirits or gods and the commons in the community. Polytheism was prevalent in all ancient civilizations- Indian, Greek, Roman, Egyptian etc. In all such civilizations many gods and goddesses were worshipped. Monotheism became widespread with the spread of Christianity and Islam. Hinduism is the only example still pursuing a Mono-polytheistic path of religion. Here there is a ‘decentralization’ of the functions of gods; the three functions — creation, sustenance and destruction — are with the three prime Gods, the trinities, Brhama, Vishnu and Śiva. Then there are other gods and goddesses, having specific attributes, presiding deities of various human aspects of life and existence. They are worshipped and propitiated for specific purposes according to the wishes of the worshipper. I am sure you know that Hindus worship Vighneswara (Vinayaka) for the removal of all obstacles; Lakshmi for wealth and prosperity, Saraswathi for *vidya* or learning and fine arts and so on. But all gods and goddesses are also manifestations of a single principle, the Ultimate, *Paraśakthi* and everything (including all gods and goddesses) are manifestations of this *Paraśakthi* and into which everything merges at the end. Brahma, Vishnu and Siva are also the manifestations of the one and only ultimate *Parashakthi*, which is considered in the feminine form. Hinduism has a profound and majestic philosophy, touching upon all phases of human activities interpreting everything in terms of the *paramatma –jeevatma* concept, and everything being the manifestation of the Ultimate. Ancient India’s great utterances (or *mahavakyas*) were emanated from this profound understanding that man (and in fact everything), being the manifestation of the Ultimate is not different from *It* (the Ultimate)\*. And when we realize that everything in this Universe is the manifestation of the Ultimate (*Paraśakthi*), we also come to the zenith of Pantheism, visualizing the light of God the Ultimate, in everything, and therefore all organisms have the same status and right for existence on this earth. [\* The four great utterances or *mahavakyas* of ancient India are: *tat-tvam-asi* (‘thou art that’), *aham brahmāsmi* [‘I am brahman’ or ‘I am the divine/ absolute’], *prajñānam brahma* (wisdom/ consciousness/ is brahma or absolute) and *ayam ātmā brahma* (this atman (self) is brahman (the absolute)].

The impacts of Brahmanism from the early centuries have modified the animistic practices greatly. Worship of plants still remains common in India, especially among the rural communities, and a variety of traditions and practices are still prevalent. At one level we have the village deity – *jagratha devata* - or a deity for a small village forest (*vana devata*) protecting and safeguarding the inhabitants of the village and worshipped by all irrespective of cast and creed. On the other hand, there also existed in earlier times exclusive community worship places or temples where members of other communities were barred; now

such discrimination is against the law. Many such worship places are also associated with serpent worship and such temples are often physically associated with a tree like a neem, a peepal, a banyan, a vilva etc. It is an established fact that tree worship and serpent worship are the early stages of worship through which the human race passed. These are the lowest forms of worship, but at the same time the tree worship also has a higher level of symbolism. As Swami Vivekananda said (3):

‘Tree worship and serpent worship always go together. There is the tree of knowledge. There must always be the tree, and the tree is somehow connected with the serpent. These are the oldest forms of worship. Even there you find that some particular tree or some particular stone is worshipped not all trees and stones in the world.... These are low states of worship, and yet worship. We all have to pass through them. It is only from an intellectual standpoint that they are not good enough. In our hearts we cannot get rid of them....

....There is still a higher order of formal worship- the world of symbolism..... There are all sorts of symbols all over the world... there is some truth in symbolism. There cannot be any falsehood without some truth behind it... There is the symbolic form of worship in different religions.’

A living example of tree worship and its association with goddesses along with serpent worship is seen in the case of the sacred groves in India. Sacred groves are small patches of forests or groves of trees and associated vegetation, protected by local communities as being the residing places of deities. They vary in area from a hectare to a few square kilometers and are the sites of socio-religious and socio-cultural rituals of associated communities. Such sacred groves are also micro- reservoirs of valuable plant and animal diversity. In the past, sacred groves were maintained in most parts of the world, including Europe. Many studies exist on the famous Mediterranean sacred groves of the past. The ancient Greeks and Roman landscapes were dotted with hundreds of sacred places that are associated with a grove of trees. Such small groves were the abodes of ‘nature spirits’ or ‘tree spirits.’ Pliny (4) the elder, who lived in the first century AD, indicated that ‘trees were the first temples of Gods, and even now, simple country people dedicate a tree of exceptional height to a god.’ The Roman mythology has ample indications of personification of plant spirits. Humans change to trees and vice versa. For the Greeks, the formidable goddess Artemis was the protector of forests, wilderness and wild life, and wilderness itself was then considered sacred. In the centuries that followed, sacred groves vanished from the European landscape due to a variety of reasons such as rapid urbanization, flourishing timber industry, use of large quantity of wood for house construction and so on. Whatever remained was systematically destroyed by the rapidly growing Christian church. The Christian church in its formative years and in the subsequent middle ages, considered anything that was non-Christian as pagan and was razed down systematically.

Alka Mai remained silent for a while and then continued.

“In India, sacred groves form part of the socio-religious life of the rural population. Many communities practice the custom of performing rituals and ceremonies to appease the presiding deity of the sacred grove in order to ensure the well being of the community and the families. Such sacred groves often define the cultural and ethnic identity of the associated community. The sacred groves started their journey from the pre-agrarian community of primitive humans and their importance has been repeatedly emphasized by many anthropologists. They are the storehouses of biodiversity, of medicinal plants, and they also provide the water needs of the nearby

communities. Many groves are associated with streams and ponds and the deep tree root system functions like a sponge to absorb and retain water. Some estimates mention that 100,000 to 150,000 sacred groves exist in the Indian subcontinent even now, forming a veritable store house of natural biodiversity. Earlier times in Kerala, it was a common practice to demarcate and maintain small patches of land having a few trees as an abode of mother goddess or serpent goddess (*kavu*). Once hundreds of such '*kavus*' dotted the landscape of Kerala. It was then a practice to light an oil lamp every evening in front of the '*kavu*.' Naturally they were the focal points of worship before the temples were built."

Alka Mai continued after a couple of minutes.

"Probably you have heard of the book, *The Golden Bough* by Sir John Frazer. It was this book that kindled global interest in the study of sacred plants and customs associated with them. In this marvelous book, Frazer documented the nature and types of tree and plant worship in many primitive as well as the modern societies; how among the ancient Greeks and Romans oak, apple, laurel, mistletoe etc., became symbols of their gods and goddesses; the many strange customs, myths and legends associated with plant worship that were in vogue all over the world, including India. The methods and conclusions of Frazer were questioned by later anthropologists but none can deny the impact of this book on world social anthropology. Frazer and later on many others came to the inevitable conclusion that it was the primitive tree worship that gradually evolved into the polytheistic form of worship. John Stewart Collis in his book '*The Triumph of Tree*' writes:

'Today the tree is the body, tomorrow the abode of a spirit- animism turns into polytheism. Thus we see the wild Huntsman of North America known as Heno, riding the clouds and splitting the forest trees with his thunderbolt; and then we see him later, gathering the clouds together and pouring down warm rains- as a god of agriculture. Many simple spirits developed into a general spirit of vegetation, and often enough in the primitive mind several misconceptions existed at the same time.' (5)

Let me quote a passage from '*The Golden Bough*' of Frazer:

'When a tree comes to be viewed, no longer as the body of the tree-spirit, but simply as its abode, which it can quit at pleasure, an important advance has been made in religious thought. Animism is passing into polytheism. In other words, instead of regarding each tree as a living and conscious being, man now sees in it merely a lifeless, inert mass, tenanted for a longer or shorter time by a supernatural being who, as he can pass freely from tree to tree, thereby enjoys a certain right of possession or lordship over the trees and ceasing to be a tree-soul, becomes a forest god. As soon as the tree-spirit is thus in a measure disengaged from each particular tree, he begins to change his shape and assume the body of a man, in virtue of a general tendency of early thought to clothe all abstract spiritual beings in concrete human form. Hence in classical art the sylvan deities are depicted in human shape, their woodland character being denoted by a branch or some equally obvious symbol. But this change of shape does not affect the essential character of the tree-spirit. The powers, which he exercised as a tree-soul incorporate in a tree, he still continues to wield as a god of trees. ...that trees considered as animate beings are credited with the power of making the rain to fall, the sun to shine, flocks and herds to multiply, and women to bring forth easily; and, second, that the very same powers are attributed to tree-gods conceived as anthropomorphic beings or as actually incarnate in living men.'

Frazer cites examples from across the continents and societies to show this evolution of tree worship from the primitive nature worship to polytheistic form and that the tree gods evolved from the form of a tree to that of a stylized human male or female form. He writes:

‘Again, the tree-spirit makes the herds to multiply and blesses women with offspring. In Northern India the Indian gooseberry (*āmla*, *āmālakī*) is a sacred tree. On the eleventh of the month of *phālgun* (February) libations are poured at the foot of the tree, a red or yellow string is bound about the trunk, and prayers are offered to it for the fruitfulness of women, animals, and crops. Again, in Northern India the coconut is esteemed as one of the most sacred fruits, and is called *sriphala* or the fruit of Sri, the goddess of prosperity. It is the symbol of fertility and all through Upper India is kept in shrines and presented by the priests to women who desire to become mothers.’

In the town of Qua, near Old Calabar, people used to grow a palm-tree, which ensured conception to any barren woman who ate a nut from it.....In Europe the May-tree or May-pole is apparently supposed to possess similar powers over both women and cattle. ....In the Tuhoe tribe of Maoris the power of making women fruitful is ascribed to trees. These trees are associated with the navel-strings of definite mythical ancestors, as indeed the navel-strings of all children used to be hung upon them down to quite recent times. A barren woman had to embrace such a tree with her arms, and she received a male or a female child according as she embraced the east or the west side. The common European custom of placing a green bush on May Day before or on the house of a beloved maiden probably originated in the belief of the fertilizing power of the tree-spirit. In some parts of Bavaria such bushes are set up also at the houses of newly-married pairs, and the practice is only omitted if the wife is near her confinement; for in that case they say that the husband has “set up a May-bush for himself.” Among the South Slavonians, a barren woman who desires to have a child, places a new chemise upon a fruitful tree on the eve of St. George’s Day. Next morning before sunrise she examines the garment, and if she finds that some living creature has crept on it, she hopes that her wish will be fulfilled within the year. Then she puts on the chemise, confident that she will be as fruitful as the tree on which the garment has passed the night. Among the Kara-Kirghiz, barren women roll themselves on the ground under a solitary apple-tree, in order to obtain offspring. Lastly, the power of granting to women an easy delivery at child-birth is ascribed to trees both in Sweden and Africa. In some districts of Sweden there was formerly a *bardträäd* or guardian-tree (lime, ash, or elm) in the neighborhood of every farm. No one would pluck a single leaf of the sacred tree, any injury to which was punished by ill-luck or sickness. Pregnant women used to clasp the tree in their arms in order to ensure an easy delivery. In some tribes of the Congo region pregnant women make themselves garments out of the bark of a certain sacred tree, because they believe that this tree delivers them from the dangers that attend child-bearing. The story that Leto clasped a palm-tree and an olive-tree or two laurel-trees, when she was about to give birth to the divine twins Apollo and Artemis, perhaps points to a similar Greek belief in the efficacy of certain trees to facilitate delivery.’

I quoted Frazer to indicate that all over the world in former times tree worship was mostly associated with fertility cult and that such beliefs form an important step in the evolution of tree worship. Even now fertility cult remains very much alive and perhaps even predominates and that the many types of rituals and offerings in temples of India provide ample evidence for the importance of such worship in our country.

“In a country like India with an unbroken cultural history of over six thousand years, it is easier to trace the development of tree worship through time and space, though the mist of time has obliterated the details. Trilochan Pande while discussing tree worship in ancient India writes:

‘....however the cult seems to be a part of Nature-worship in the beginning. The aborigines and primitive people of this land must have adored the stars, the sky, the moon, the forests, the trees, the rivers etc., in their own ways and when the Aryans entered India through the northern mountains, they brought with them somewhat different concepts regarding the phenomenon of nature. Then the admixture of religious practices and manners of worship followed, which naturally affected the society in those days. In due course of time, this admixture was responsible to a great extent for developing a new pattern of popular religion. Under such circumstances it was but natural for Nature-worship including the tree worship to be influenced by diverse currents that are markable even today’(6).

The history of sacred plants in the Indian context can be more or less reconstructed from the Rig Vedic time based on the scriptures of that period and the succeeding ones. A.B. Keith wrote in his well known study on the Religion and Philosophy of the Vedas and Upanishads:

‘...The reference to the worship of trees and plants are very scanty in the Vedic ritual and mythology alike, but they are quite adequate to show that as among all other peoples these objects were not without their share of reverence. A long hymn in the last book of *Rig Veda* (X.97) is devoted to the identification of plants with special reference to their healing properties. Plants also appear in *Atharva Veda* where they are used as spells for healing, and for driving away demons of all kinds. The plant is even be sought to bestow a horse, a sheep, a garment, and the life of the patient, who doubtless was to be the instrument by which the prayer of the medicine man was to be made good if the spell succeeded in attaining its purpose. In the *Rig Veda* (X.97.18), *Soma* is already the king of plants, and they are called mothers and goddesses. The *Atharva Veda* poetically describes a plant as a goddess born, of the goddess earth. On the other hand, plants have power to hinder child birth and in that case the offering of an animal victim to them is prescribed by the *Taittiriya Samhitha* (ii.1.5.3) in order to procure their favour.’

We can thus logically assume that the cult of trees, especially trees in the forest, was well developed in the Vedic and post Vedic periods of ancient India. In later *samhithas* trees were mentioned as the abodes of *gandharvas* and *apsaras* and the *Taittiriya samhitha* even assigned their homes in *asvattha*, *vata*, *udumbara* and *palasha* trees. Shanthilal Nagar in his study of ‘*Botanical and Medicinal Plants as Depicted in Ancient Texts, Art and Archeology*,’ observed that:

‘By the Upanishad period a basic change in the approach in dealing with the trees and plants is discernible when the trees were equated with human beings. The *Yajnavalkya* and *Brahadaranyaka upanishads* were quite vocal on the subject’ and he quotes from the latter: ‘the half digested food is sand (soil), the rivers the bowels, the liver the mountains the lungs and the hair the herbs and trees’

He further quotes from the same source:

‘As a mighty tree in the forest, so in truth is the man, his hairs are the leaves, his outer skin is the bark. From his skin flows forth blood, sap from the skin of the tree; thus from the wounded man comes forth blood as from a tree that is struck. The humps of his flesh are in the tree the layers of wood; the fibre is strong like the tendons. The bones are the hard wood within; the marrow is made like the marrow of the tree’

Here we see the case of anthropomorphization of trees, how man’s thinking led to the philosophical transfiguration of a tree into a human and vice versa. The ‘tree concept’ was used very effectively in explaining philosophical issues. In *Chandogya Upanishad*, sage Uddalaka Aruni, while explaining the mysteries of *ātman* to his son Svetaketu, cites the example of a tree and its vitality. I am quoting Nagar again:

‘... If the tree is struck at its root, a kind of sap oozes out of it. If it is struck in the middle or at the top the same kind of sap comes out. It suggests therefore that the tree is pervaded from top to bottom. If the sap of vitality withdraws itself from any one of the branches, it gets dried up. If it withdraws from the whole of it, the entire tree dries up. Similar is the case with the human body. All the pleasures, all joys, all the vitality that it feels and possesses are due to *ātman*, which pervades it. When the *ātman* forsakes it, it meets death....’

The Sage Uddalaka used the seed of the fig tree to prove yet another point, the mystery of *ātman* and its manifestation. There is a famous legend given in *Chandogya Upanishad*. Max Müller has translated it, which I am quoting:

The Sage said looking at his son who was listening closely:

‘Bring hither a fig from there’

‘Here it is, sir’

‘Divide it’

‘It is divided, sir’

‘What do you see inside?’

‘These rather fine seeds, sir’

‘Of these, please divide one’

‘It is divided, sir’

‘What do you see there?’

‘Nothing at all, sir.’

Then he (the Teacher) said to his son: ‘verily, my dear, that finest essence, which you do not perceive; verily my dear, from that finest essence this great *nygradha* thus arises. Believe me my dear,’ said he, ‘that which is the finest essence, this whole world has that as its soul. That is Reality. That is *ātman*, *that art thou*, Shvetakethu.’

This statement ‘*that art thou*’ (*tat tvam asi*) is one of the greatest utterances of the *Upanishads*, one of the greatest metaphysical concepts given to the world by the ancient India. In the *Aitareya aranyaka* too we get the following reference on seed and its origin:

‘Next follows the origin of seed. The seed of Prajapati is the devas (gods). The seed of devas is the rain. The seed of rain is the herbs; the seed of herbs is food. The seed of food is seed. The seed of seed is creatures. The seed of creatures is the heart. The seed of heart is the mind. The seed of mind is speech (Veda). The seed of speech is action. The action done (in a former state) is this man, the abode of Brahman...’

Later the *Chandogya Upanishad* says that the:

‘...essence of all beings is the earth, the essence of earth is water, the essence of water is the plants, the essence of plants man, the essence of man is speech, the essence of speech *Rig Veda*, the essence of *Rig Veda* is the *Sama Veda*, the essence of *Sama Veda* is the *udgitha*,’ which is *OM* and that occupies the highest position...’

In fact, the ancient Indian philosophy equated trees with *brahman*. In *Katha upanishad* we get the famous saying:

‘there is the ancient tree, whose roots grow upward and whose branches grow downward—that indeed is called the bright, that is called *brahman*, that alone is called immortal. All the worlds are contained in it and no one goes beyond. That is that”

This concept of the inverted tree has been interpreted variously by later commentators. Some interpret that the tree is the world and the roots *Brahman*. Obviously the inverted tree is a symbol to depict the exalted position of the *Brahman*, from which the manifest beings originated and to which they are attached. The inverted tree is also a symbol of unity in diversity, which characterizes the Upanishad concept of Reality. *Brahman* is non-dual (in the form of root), while the manifest world (and the life forms) is enmeshed in diversity as exemplified by the branches, leaves, flowers, fruits that occur in diverse stages of development. A tree is the best example to express this concept, of unity in diversity — a tree that originated from a single seed, the very essence of a tree’s life, and then develops into gigantic proportion with all the diversities attached to it. The tree also stands for constancy in change, branches, twigs, leaves, flowers and fruits come and go (like the manifest beings), but the root and the trunk remain constant beyond the memory and span of one’s life (hence compared to *Brahman*).

Alka Mai continued after a few minutes:

“Yet another step in the worship of trees can be seen in the legends on deities associated with trees and forests. The first references are available in *Rig Veda* itself. In the 146 hymn of the tenth *mandala*, we get the vivid representation of gods and goddesses of trees and forests (*vanaspati*, the lord of wilderness and *Aaranya devatha*, the goddess of forest). Let me give Griffith’s translation of a *Rig Vedic* hymn:

## HYMN 10:146

1. GODDESS of wild and forest who seemest to vanish from the sight. How is it that thou seekest not the village? Art thou not afraid?
2. What time the grasshopper replies and swells the shrill cicala's voice, Seeming to sound with tinkling bells, the Lady of the Wood exults.
3. And, yonder, cattle seem to graze, what seems a dwelling-place appears: Or else at eve the Lady of the Forest seems to free the wains.
4. Here one is calling to his cow, another there hath felled a tree: At eve the dweller in the wood fancies that somebody hath screamed.
5. The Goddess never slays, unless some murderous enemy approach. Man eats of savoury fruit and then takes, even as he wills, his rest.
6. Now have I praised the Forest Queen, sweet-scented, redolent of balm, The Mother of all sylvan things, who tills not but hath stores of food.

The point that I want to stress is that the stream of worship of plants can be traced from the *Rig Vedic* times to the later epic period and further through the successive centuries to the modern times and to-date. *Soma* was the first plant held sacred. *Satapatha brahmana* mentions *ásvattha*, *nygrodha*, and *udumbara* as the sacred trees. In the *Aranyakas* we get references on many trees and other plants and their usage, including the swings made of wood, which were used by ladies. This 'phytopantheon' grew into what we see in later *Puranas* and other religious texts."

"In ancient texts we come across many references on the origin of plants. The *Satapatha brahmana* contains such a reference:

'..... *Hiranyagarbha*, who sprang from *apah*, assumed the work of a creator. After having created the elements he reclined to rest.....from his hair his thought flowed and became the millet plant. From his skin his honour flowed and became the *ásvattha* tree. From his flesh his vitality flowed and became the *udumbara* tree. From his bones honey flowed and became the *nygrodha* tree. From his marrow *soma* juice flowed and became the rice plant. ...*vilva* tree sprang up from his marrow and *khadira* from his bones, and *palāsh* from his flesh.....' (*hiranyagarbha* – Brahma; *apah* – water).

*Chandogya upanishad* has the following words about the birth of plants:

'.... Having become the mist, he becomes the cloud, having become a cloud, he rains down. Then he is born as rice and corn, herb and trees, sesame and beans. From thence the escape is beset with most difficulties. For whoever the person may be that eat them, and beget offspring, he henceforth becomes like one to them...'

*Vamana purana* mentions the divine origin of some sacred plants:

'In the month of *Asvina*, *padma* was born out of the navel of Vishnu; *kadamba* from the forearm of Kamadeva, *vata vruksha* from Manibhadra (king of Yakshas), *dhattura* was born out of the chest of Śiva, *khadira* from the middle body of Brahma, *kautaki* from Visvakarma.'

Similarly the emergence of other plants too is mentioned:

Palm of Parvathi	- <i>kunda</i>
Ganesa	- <i>sindhuvara</i>
Yama	- Right side- <i>plasha</i> ; left side- <i>udumbara</i>
Rudra	- <i>udvejaka vruksha</i>
Skanda	- <i>bandiyava</i>
Sun	- <i>asvattha</i>
Katyayani	<i>sami</i>
Lakshmi	- <i>vilva</i>
Sesh nag	- <i>sarastamba (sarepata)</i>
Vasuki (tail)	- Back: <i>sveta durva</i> ; tail: <i>krishna durva</i> .
Heart of Sandhya	- <i>haridra</i> (turmeric), <i>chandana</i> .

According to puranas like the *Vishnu Dharmothra purana*, many ancillary gods and goddesses have trees as their abode. For example Jyeshtha Devi or Alakshmi, the elder sister of Devi Lakshi, and the abode of all that are unholy, has her abode in *asvatha* tree (peepal) except on Saturdays, the day on which goddess Lakshmi visits the tree. The seven divine mothers (*Sapta Matrika* or *Sapta kannya*), created by the various gods, are believed to have their abodes in trees: Brahmani occupies *palasha* tree, Vaishnavi in *raja vriksha* (variously interpreted as *peepal*, Indian laburnum and *parijata*), Indrani in *kalpaka* tree (the mythical wish fulfilling tree, identity not known- identified with peepal, coconut or parijatha), Chamunda in *plaksha* (cluster fig or Java fig), Maheswari in *pundarika* (white lotus), Kaumari in *plaksha* (cluster fig, Java [pig]), and Varahi in *kalpaka* (peepal, coconut or parijata).

Now we will consider yet another aspect of tree worship. Many an ancient text extolled the blessings one get from planting of trees. In *Matsya purana* the chapter 59 is devoted to the prescription of dedicating trees, planting trees and their maintenance. Here we get the long lasting benefits of planting trees:

‘If anybody plant at least one tree he will be able to stay in heaven of Indra for thirty thousand years. The planter of trees liberates the same number of his past and future sins, attains the highest perfection and is never reborn on earth.’

The rites and ceremonies connected with the dedication and consecration of trees are also mentioned

This idea is repeated in other *puranas* too:

*Agni purana* says:

‘The plantation of trees and construction of pleasure garden (for the public) are conducive to purgation of sin and enjoyment of prosperity’

*Vayu purana* stresses:

‘He never goes to hell who plants an *asvattha*, a *pitchumanda* (neem) or a banyan or ten jasmines or two pomegranates or five mango trees. Never cut down trees that bear flowers and fruits if you desire the increase of your family or your wealth and your future happiness’

Let me quote an interesting passage from *Padma purana*. This is the translation by Santhilal Nagar:

‘O Lord of Kings, he who thus installs (the plants) a tree, would also live in heaven as long as three myriads of Indras (rule there) and would save (from falling into hell), past and future men (ie. his relatives) equal to the number of hairs on the body. He attains great prosperity, making rebirth difficult. Even that man who listens to this or makes others listen to it (ie. read it to others) is honoured by gods and in the world of *brahman*. The tree alone makes a sonless person have a son. They offer libations to plants at sacred places. O, Lord of Kings, plant an *āsvattha* tree even with great effort. It alone will give you thousand sons. And by planting an *āsvattha* tree a man becomes wealthy; the *āsoka* tree destroys grief. The *plaksha* tree is said to bestow the fruit of a sacrifice, the *kshira* tree is said to give long life, *jambuka* (planting) bestows daughters, *dadima* gives a wife, *āsvattha* leads to destruction of diseases, and *plaksha* takes one to *brahman*. A man who plants a *vibhutaka* tree becomes a ghost. The planting of an *ankola* tree leads to the expansion of family. Planting of a *khadira* tree gives health. The Sun is ever pleased with *nimba* shoots. Lord Śiva is pleased when a tree is planted and Parvathi is pleased when a red *lodhra* is planted. The celestial nymphs are pleased with the planting of *simsapa* and the Gandharvas with the *kunda* plants. One would get a group of servants if one plants *tintidika* tree. Similarly, the planting of *vanjula* leads to the rise of robbers. *Chandana* and *panasa* also give religious merits and love. Planting of *champaka* gives good fortune and that of *karira* makes one adulterer. Planting of *tala* destroys one’s progeny, while planting of *vakula* (*bakula*) expands the family. The planting of coconut tree brings many wives, while planting of a grape-creeper makes one have all beautiful wives. Similarly planting of *kali* causes sexual enjoyment. Planting of *ketaki* destroys one’s enemies. These trees and others, which are not mentioned, are givers of various objects. Those who have planted trees will attain high position...’

In *Bhavishya purana* there is a similar statement. Further it states that a *plaksha* if planted in a pleasure garden pleases Brahma and that he would bestow on the planter highest knowledge and a wife; a *vilva* if planted would give a long life; *jambu* would bestow wealth; *tinduka* is the giver of prosperity; *dadima* would bestow a good wife; *bakula* and *vanjula* destroy sins and give strength and intellect; planting of *dhataki* elevates one to heaven and *vata* gives salvation. Similarly planting of mango tree and *guvaka* (betel-nut tree) are said to fulfill all one’s desires. *Padma purana* says that if a person plants an *āsvattha* tree near a pond and the leaves falling in the pond water would be like the offering of *pindas* (after-death rite) and that his ancestors would stay in heaven. Similar virtues are obtained by planting *champaka*, *arka*, *nygrodha* and *nimba*; the benefits of planting ten such trees are equal to the planting of one *āsvattha*.

“The *Dhanvanthari samhitha* of the *Garuda purana* lists a number of medicinal herbs used in curing diseases and also mentions the drugs and their recipes. Nagar has provided a list of these plants in his book that I mentioned earlier. There are some well known sayings related to trees in Surapala’s *Vrikshayurveda*:

‘*dasakupasama vāpi dasavāpisama hrada*  
*dasabradasama putro dasaputrasama drumā*’

One *vāpi* (tank) is as good as ten wells, one lake is as good as ten tanks, one son is as good as ten lakes and one tree is as good as ten sons.

In this book the whole chapter on *Tarumahima* highlights the greatness of planting trees. Plants mentioned include *thulsi*, *vilva*, *āsvattha*, *āmalaki*, *vata*, *nimba*, *amra*, *sirisa*, *plaksha*, *udumbara* etc.

*āsvatthamekoni picumandamekom*

*nygrodhamekom dasacincinikom*

*kapitha bilvāmalathrayam ca*

*pancambravāpee narakom ca paçeyeth*

A person who plants an *āsvattha* (peepal), a *pichumanda* (neem), a *nygrodha* (banyan), ten *chinchinikom* (tamarind), one each of *kapitha* (lemon), *vilva* (wood apple) and *amala* (gooseberry) and five *amra* (mango trees) will never see hell.

These are exhortations to the public and by linking tree planting with the attainment of heaven or *moksha* (salvation), the ancients successfully implemented very dynamic tree planting and conservation programmes. During the time of Manu, the composer of *Manu Samhitha* (or *Manu Smrithi*), destruction of plants became a state offense and in his code Manu provided provisions for punishment for the cutter of those trees that should be preserved.

There is a passage in *Matsya purana* and also in *Bhavishya purana* which formulates the proper ceremony for planting trees:

‘Clean the soil and water it. Decorate trees with garlands, burn incense in front of them and place one pitcher filled with water by the side of each tree. As you offer prayers and oblations to the sacrificial fire, do likewise for the tree. By singing benedictive songs and reciting hymns from the *Rig*, *Yajur* and *Sama Vedas* sprinkle holy water on the tree from the pitcher kept nearby. Water the plants four times a day and offer oblations with seeds of mustard, barley and sesamum. Kindle fire from *palaasha* (*plāksha*) wood. After worshipping them in this way, celebrate the actual planting. He who plant even one tree, goes straight to heaven and obtains the highest perfection.’

The great importance attached to tree planting by the ancient Indians is evident in the above passage, which is also exemplified in other *puranas*.”

“Trees and tree worship have gone deep into the iconographic culture of India. Trees worshipped as the abode of tree spirits or as the abode of deities were sculpted on the walls of temples; such trees also show garlands hanging from it. Sometimes such trees are depicted as being worshipped by humans, celestial beings and also animals. Such open worship places are known as hyperthreal temples, which are depicted in the sculptures of Bhaarhut, Sanchi, Amaravati and Nagarjunamkonda; all of them are basically Buddhist shrines. The trees sculpted are *nygrodha*, *āsvattha*, *bādari*, *kadamba*, *kathal*, *sirisha*, *vanni*, *vilva*, *udumbara*, *ashoka*, *sala*, *naga kesar*, *amra* etc. In general, Saiva temples dedicated to Lord Śiva have motifs of *vilva*, *nygrodha* and *arka* carved on the temple pillars and walls, while in Vaishnava temples dedicated to Lord Vishnu or his incarnations have carvings of Ramayana scenes or scenes from *Bhagavatha purana* such as *kadamba* tree and the *kaliya damana* or *vastraharana* episodes (7).

Tree shrines form an important aspect of worship among the ardent believers of Hinduism. Haberman has carried out a detailed survey and study on the tree shrines and tree worship in North India that appeared in his book titled *People trees*.(8) This study depicts mainly the worship of the three trees, pipal, banyan and nimba. Haberman graphically describes the process of worship of these trees which includes tying

coloured threads around trees, covering the trunk with clothes, anointing the tree trunk with turmeric powder and vermillion, offering of rice, lighting lamps and conducting arati and then circumambulating the tree, chanting prayers and so on. Often a small temple is constructed at the base of the trees where a lamp is lighted daily morning and evening; the devotees pray to the tree deity, circumambulate and recite prayers. In such tree shrines the pipal is considered the manifest form of Lord Hari (Vishnu), while banyan is in the form of Siva and nimba of devi Durga.”

“Tree theme has gone deep into the Indian folk songs and traditions too. All languages and cultures of India are rich in folk lore and songs that have woven into a rich cultural tapestry. Much of the lore and folk songs are lost, the surviving ones give us the glimpses of the importance attached to the trees and plants by our ancestors. Randhawa writes in his book *Flowering Trees in India* and I quote:

‘In almost all Indian languages, trees form the subject of many folk- songs. Sometimes they are used as mere pegs to hang human emotions on, and they become symbols of man’s joy or grief. Occasionally, they are personified and they express their own feelings as in the following song:

The semel tree meditates:

Why are my flowers red?

Why are not my flowers offered to gods and goddesses?

Why does’nt the maid makes garlands of them?

Randhawa quotes from many folk songs from many languages, from across the Indian sub-continent in his book to illustrate the deep rooted relationship between humans and trees. He comments that in folk songs often the woman represents the human soul, and the never-ending search of the soul for God is the theme of many of the songs. The other main theme is the representation of the pain and loneliness resulted from the separation of lovers. Whatever is the theme, trees appear again and again and they are treated as if they are the kith and kin of the singer. Hear these lines:

‘...The pepal sings; the banyan sings,

And the green mulberry too:

Stop, traveler, and listen,

Your soul will be set again.....’

‘...The goddess feels hungry, brother,

She asks for milk to drink.

Shall I milk the banyan or the *barohi* tree?

My raina cow has gone a long way off .....

‘...On the branches of the mango, a bunch of mangoes looks lovely,

In the forest the *palaas* trees are blossoming;

In the lap of fair bride the child looks lovely,

As though the moon appeared on the sky..

On the branch of the mango the *koel* sings

In the forest the peacock dances;  
On the river bank I sing my *birha*,  
It pierces the heart....’

(*birha*- for the Sanskrit *viraha*, separation from the loved one)

Every tree had its own tale of woe, and such a tale is reflected in a folk song from Shimla:

‘O, cruel wood cutter,  
Cut merely my lower branches  
Do not stretch out your axe toward the top,  
O, leave it for the birds’ nests..’

A Dhola song goes like this:

‘Living *peelu* tree!  
Your roots are gone deep into the soil,  
Well-shaped is your stem since birth,  
Over it your branches have added colour,  
My neighbours are all ready for the journey,  
Drums have announced the news.....’

Randhawa comments that in such folk songs the woman represents the human soul, and the never-ending search of the soul for God is the theme of the *dhola* songs. Again and again the *peelu* tree is addressed in the *dhola* song as if it understood the human voice, and when the search for God seems to bear no fruit, the singer looks towards the old forest tree for advice. These folk songs are the crystallization of inspiration provided by trees to humanity for thousands of years.

‘I would like to touch upon the relationship that existed between women and trees, especially in the ancient and medieval rural India. You might have heard of the concept of *dauhruda* or *dohada*, which is the term used in modern writings. *Dohada*, in the modern sense means the special cravings for things that women experience during pregnancy. It was considered the *dharma* or the bounden duty of the husband to satisfy such cravings of his pregnant wife. However the concept of *dohada* had been depicted among plants also by the ancient poets and artists. Of course, such ideas were simple, like a tree blossoming following the touch of a woman. The well known example is that of *asoka*, which is said to bloom when a beautiful virgin kicks the tree. In the eyes of social anthropologists, *dohada* is related to fertility, or even related to the rite of fertilization. Ancient Indian artists and craftsmen have also created the well known *salabhanjika* carvings in which a woman is carved or painted embracing a tree. This again is related to fertility rite; of course, here the tree appears to be involved in the rite of fertilization. In *dohada*, the woman either touches or embraces or kicks the tree and the tree is believed to break into blossom. In the case of *priyanga*, a woman’s touch is enough, in the case of *bakula*, the tree craves for the wine from a woman’s mouth (a mouth full of water sprinkled on the tree), *asoka* craves for a kick from a beautiful damsel, a mere glance is enough to send *tilaka* into blossom, *kurabaka* tree needs an embrace, *mandāra* craves for loving words, *champakaka* craves for a woman’s laughter, *amra* needs the warm breath of a woman, *karnikara* craves to see the dancing of a

maiden while the *nameru* tree craves for her song. Maurice Bloomfield had written a study on ‘The *dohada* or Craving of Pregnant Women’ that appeared in the Journal of the American Oriental Society, way back in 1920 (9). He quoted some interesting passages from the ancient Indian writings. In *Pārsvanātha charitha* four trees broke into blossom in spring having fulfilled their *dohadas*:

*pusyanti tarunistitasta yasmin kuruvakadrumah*  
*vikasam yanty asokās tu vadhupāda praharāh*  
*mrugakṣi sidhugandusaih pusyanti bakula api*  
*champakas tu praphullanti sugandhajala dohadaih|*

‘(Came spring) when the *kuruvaka* trees bloom, as they are embraced by young maids; when the *asoka* trees burst into bloom, as they are struck by the feet of young women; when the *bakula* trees bloom, as sprayed with the wine from the mouths of gazelle eyed maidens; when the *champakas* trees burst into bloom as they are sprinkled with perfumed water.’

In *Vasavadatta* of Bhasa there are repeated references on this aspect of trees flowering:

‘Came spring, that makes *bakula* trees horripilate from sprinkling with wine in mouthfuls by amorous maids, merry with drink; that hundreds of *asoka* trees delighted by the slow stroke of the tremulous lotus feet, beautiful with anklets, of wanton damsels, enslaved by amorous delights .....

‘In spring, by its fresh shoots the *asoka*, because of its longing to be touched by a maiden’s ankleted foot, red with the dye of new lac, seemed to have assumed that colour. The *bakula* shone as if through sprinkling with mouthfuls from amorous girls’ lotus lips, completely filled with sweet wine, it had assumed its (the wine’s) colour in its own flowers’ (10).”

There is yet another study on the same subject by Rama Pisharoti, ‘Dohada or the woman and tree motif’ published in the Indian Society of Oriental Art in 1935. (11) Nagar has also given a brief discussion on the dohada, women and tree motifs as represented in the sculptures and paintings of the ancient India.

Perhaps related to this is the various rites and rituals once existed in Indian rural societies to make trees fruit. There is the exhaustive three volume documentation on plant worship and vegetation divinities in India by J.J Meyer (*Trilogie altindischer Mächte und Feste der Vegetation*) (12). The first volume of this compilation is on Kama the god of love and vegetation in which he listed acts such as beating the tree trunk with a stick, the owner emitting semen on the tree trunk or root, the owner husband and wife making love under the tree and so on. To my knowledge Meyer’s book has not appeared fully in English translation.”

“The most important members of the Indian phytopantheon are *āsvattha* (peepal tree), *vata* (banyan tree), *vilva* (wood apple tree) *thulsi* (sacred basil) and *padma* (lotus). Second in importance are *asoka*, *amra* (mango), *āmalaki* (Indian gooseberry, ionola), neem, *kadali* (plantain) etc. Symbolically they all represent either incarnations of deities, or are considered abodes of deities. In the *Brahma purana* as well as in the *Padmapurana* we get the legend that the fierce Hiranyaka, who became invincible due to the boons bestowed on him by Brahma, pursued the gods and that they entered trees for hiding. Śiva entered the *vata*, Vishnu the *āsvattha*, Brahma the *palasha*, Indra the *sirisa* and the Sun god entered *nimba*. All these trees became very sacred. *Padma purana* and also *Skanda purana* mention that during the four rainy

months (*chaturmasya*) the gods, goddesses and demi-gods take resort in creepers and fulfill the desires of men. The same sources say that during the *chaturmasya* period the gods enter *amra* (mango) trees, the *gandharvas* in sandal trees, the *gananayakas* in *agaru* trees, the *yakshas* in *punnaga* trees, *guhyakas* in the *panasa* tree, *siddhas* in *kankola*, *nagas* in the *nagavruksha*, *kinnaras* in *maricha* creeper, Kama in *yashtimadhu* plant, Agni in *raktanjan*, Yama in *vibhitaki*, Varuna in the *karjoora*, Vayu in the *pooga vruksha*, Kubera in the *asoka* tree, *rudras* in *badari* tree, the seven sages (*sapta rishis*) in the *tala* trees, *vasus* in *priyala*, *adityas* in *japa*, the two *aswins* in the *mandāra*, *bhutās* in *guggulu* tree, Sun in the *arka* plant, Soma in *palāsa*, Kuja in *khadira*, Budha in *apamarga*, Brahaspati in *āsvattha*, Sukra in *udumbara*, Sani in *sami* tree and all gods as a group stay in *madhuka*. (13). All such legends and myths are clear indications of the interaction of nature and tree worship with the worship of gods, semi gods and supernatural powers and the transition and transformation of tree worship into a polytheistic form of worship.

There is indication in *Brahmavaivarta purana* that special groves of some specific trees were maintained in ancient times and people circumambulated these groves. The trees mentioned in such groves include *chandana*, *champaka*, *yuthika*, *madhavi*, *bakula* and *lavanga* creeper. Planting of trees around dwelling places was considered important in ancient times and *Garuda purana* provides some directions how to plant and where to plant specific trees. There are taboos too. *Vata*, *salmali* and *tintirini* trees were taboo near army camps. In *Matsya purana* it is mentioned that certain types of trees should not be used for house construction, like trees secreting milk, trees with birds' nests, trees felled by an elephant, those struck by lightning, those growing close to temples, burial grounds, confluence of rivers, half dried, broken and those growing on the banks of lakes.

Among the trees the peepal (pipal) or *āsvattha* is the cosmic tree in the Indian culture, it is the mystic tree of India. Peepal is also the most sacred tree for the Buddhists. We also have a mystic flower, the lotus. This flower is seldom worshipped, but it is one the most widely used in worshipping all deities. More over it is also one of the most sacred for the Buddhists, for the Chinese, Vietnamese and for the Japanese. This flower is the seat of Brahma, of goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswathi; and it is also the seat of Gauthama the Buddha.”

“As time rolled on and centuries passed, many ceremonies and beliefs grew up around the sacred trees. In such ceremonies plants became the symbolic medium to propitiate a favorite deity for a particular purpose. When one looks at the purposes of such worship and ceremonies one gets an interesting list:

- to win fertility in women, animals and land
- for good luck, wealth, prosperity and fortune
- to drive away ghosts, evil spirits and demons
- for curing, averting or alleviating diseases
- for securing a place in heaven after death
- for getting a husband, for husband's love, affection and health
- for relieving labor pains and safe delivery
- to avoid ill luck, curse and evil influences of others
- to avert widowhood
- for good harvest and plentiful crops
- to offer oblations to ancestors for the satisfaction and blessings of the departed souls
- for immortality and to avoid ill influences and misfortune

- to satisfy souls and holy spirits that reside in trees
- for any other purpose for a happy and peaceful life.

Trees were associated with many omens in the past and such beliefs are still popular in some of the tradition-bound villagers in India. Sadashiv Dange, in his Encyclopaedia of Puranic Beliefs and Practices, lists the omens with which trees (planted in the house) are associated with. Let me quote a passage:

‘The weeping of the tree indicates diseases; laughter indicates confusion in the country; fall of a branch death of a warrior in war; flowering when underdeveloped – death of children; fruit or flowers prior to season breakage of the nation; milking all round destruction; oily substances famine; flow of wine (*madyasraava*) – destruction or erosion of vehicles; blood war; honey disease; water lack of rain; and if the fruit or the flowers are spoilt on the tree itself, the indication is the death of the king (*Matsya purana*)’

In case a tree shows the signs noted above the following ritual/remedy is prescribed.

‘The tree should be covered and should be worshipped with sandal and wreaths of flowers; on it an umbrella should be held for pacification of the evil; Brahmins should be fed and the gods should be pacified with dance, music and songs (*Bhavishya purana*)’

Flowers are also associated with good and evil omens as well as with certain magical rites or sorcery as mentioned in *Agni purana*. White flowers indicate good omens. There is a mention in *Vamana purana* that a person should go for his daily duties after touching a white flower. For killing a person, flowers of *karaveera*, yellow *sapha* and mustard were indicated. Flower of *datura* smeared with ghee and offered into fire would fulfill all desires. Offering of *jati* flower smeared with ghee into fire would fulfill the desire of getting a daughter. For the worship of goddesses lotuses are indicated to be offered into fire.”

“In India there are a number of festivals associated with plants and many are observed by women for removing barrenness or for getting male progeny, or for a long married life with husbands and children. Some of these ceremonies are simple and consists only of praying, lighting a lamp or tying a thread; some can be very elaborate and lasts for a few days. Perhaps the most elaborate one is the *navapatra pooja*, prevalent in many parts of India, most noticeably in Bengal. *Navapatra pooja* forms part of *durga pooja* ceremony. Here nine aspects of Durga, symbolized by nine plants are worshipped. The nine aspects are:

*Brahmani*: a benevolent aspect of Shakthi, considered to be the female counterpart of Brahma, represented by a plantain (banana plant) with stem and leaves.

*Kali (Kalika)*: a terrible form that Shakthi had taken while fighting with Mahishasura. There are several episodes about her origin and worship. She is represented with Kachu (colocasia) plant.

*Durga*: Durga herself is present in *haridra* (turmeric) and so this is the third plant.

*Kritika*: Durga took this form (also known as Kartiki) while fighting Sumbha and Nisumbha and she is represented by *jayanthi* (balloon wine or heart seed), and this becomes the fourth plant.

*Raktadantika*: Shakthi took this form who fought against the demon Raktabija. She is represented by *dadima* (pomegranate), which is the fifth plant.

It is believed that *parashakti* when incarnated as Parvathi, worshipped Lord Śiva with flowers of *asoka* and that the Lord loves this tree, and that Devi made it her abode in the aspect Sokarahitha, the remover of sorrow. So *asoka* becomes the sixth plant.

*Chamunda*: An aspect of Durga emanated from the forehead of Karthyayani (an incarnation of Durga who killed the invincible demon Mahishasura) for killing the fearsome demons Chanda and Munda, and she is symbolized by the arum plant, and this forms the seventh plant.

The paddy plant is the food and source of nourishment of the humans and Devi Parvathi in the aspect of Annapoorna (the goddess of food and nourishment) dwells in this (so also lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity). This is the eighth plant.

All these leaves are bundled together with a ninth plant, a branch of *vilva* tree bearing two fruits that represent Śiva and Śakthi.

All the nine plants are tied into a bundle with a *girikarnika* vine, which again symbolizes Durga. (14). This bundle is ceremoniously given bath, then dressed in red silk, vermilion is applied, decorated, placed by the side of the idol of Durga and worshipped as Devi Durga for nine days. Each day, an aspect of the Devi is invoked separately and pooja is offered. Here each plant or leaf is collected ceremoniously, and much formalities exist in bundling them, in giving ceremonious bath and in dressing and decorating the goddess. Once it is decorated and placed in the altar the bundle of leaves is treated just like an idol of Durga and all offerings and poojas are offered to it. The whole festival is an elaborate one in which all people in the neighbourhood participates. Here is an example of an evolution of simple plant worship to a complex and elaborate one with lot of symbolism attached. The well known Navadurga tradition is closely allied to the Durga aspects worshipped during the navapatrapooja. According to the Devi Mahatmyam tradition the Navadurgas are: Śhailaputrī, Brahmachāriṇī, Chandrakāṇṭhā, Kuṣhmāṇḍā, Skandamātā, Kātyāyanī, Kālarātrī (Kali), Mahāgaurī and Siddhidātrī. These nine forms of Durga are the major deities worshipped during the nine days of the navaratri festival. The navadurga worship is popular all over India, while the navapatrapooja tradition is observed mostly in Bengal, Bihar, Gujarat, Rajasthan and in Uttarpradesh. Even in these places it is not that popular except perhaps in the rural areas and that too only among the high cast Hindus.

Yet another example of such an elaborate worship is the *vruksha panchayatana puja*, in which five gods (Śiva, Vishnu, Surya, Ambika and Ganesha) are worshipped symbolically through the worship of five sets of plants (*vilva* and *drona* for Śiva, *aśvattha* and *thulsi* for Vishnu, *karaveera* and *svetarka* for Surya, *khadira* and *doorva* for Ganesha and *aśoka* and *śankapushpa* for Ambika or Durga). This is a permanent set up for such worship and the set up varies with the type of deity being worshipped. For example for Śiva *panchayatana pooja*, Śiva, symbolized by *vilva* occupies the centre. In the North-East corner Ambika (represented by *aśoka*), in the North-West Corner Vishnu (symbolized by *aśvattha*), in the South-West Corner Ganesha (symbolized by *khadira*), and in the South-East corner Surya (represented by *karaveera*). In each location surrounding the tree the second plant is planted in a circle. *Drona* is planted around *vilva*, *thulsi* around *aśvattha*, *śankapushpa* around *aśoka*, *svetarka* around *karaveera* and *doorva* around *khadira*. In the Vishnu *panchayatana pooja*, *aśvattha* occupies the centre. This type of *panchayatana* set up is seen as a common worship facility in certain villages, often associated with temples. Another type of *panchayatana pooja* is the one developed by Shanakaracharya in order to teach people the unification of various Gods. In this case, five deities are worshipped simultaneously, keeping the *ishtadevata*, the chosen deity, in the centre and the others in four corners. The deities are worshipped either keeping their images or using symbolic objects such as: *salagrma* for Vishnu, *banalinga* or white quartz for Śiva, metallic stone for Devi, red stone for Ganapati and *sphatika* (crystal) for Surya. These five deities are represented as associated with the five cosmic elements: Śiva with water, Ganapathi with earth, Devi with fire, Surya with air, and Vishnu with ether.” (15).

“Perhaps you are aware of the *sthalavrikshas* associated with the Indian temples. *Sthalavriksha* (which can be translated as temple tree) is a plant that is held sacred, sometimes even on par with the prime deity in the temple; this infact is the living relic of the earlier nature worship. In the Siva temples, especially in the South Indian states, there are three components that are considered sacred. They are the deity, the *sthalavriksha* and the *theertham* (sacred tank). Some surveys and studies have gone into such *sthalavrikshas* and the associated lore and traditions. (16, 17). In Tamil Nadu 34 species of plants were recorded as *sthalavrikshas*. The most common trees are *vilva* and *vata* (in all Siva temples), peepal (in all Vishnu and Krishna temples), and neem (in Durga temples). Others include:

Indian gooseberry (Asthiswarar temple at Athanur), *Sami* (Aavudaiyar temple, Moonusavadi), *Mandaara* (Amirthalingeswarar temple, Veppilaipatty), *nuxvomica* (Alagambasewarar temple, Kalarampalli), *madhuka* (Arthanareswarar temple, Tiruchengode), Indian laburnum (Maligeswarar temple, Kothapalayam), *asoka* (Pasupathi eswarar temple, Karur), *punnaga* (Ponvaratharaja perumal temple, Rasipuram), *patali* (Suguvaneswar temple, Salem), mango tree (Thantondrieswarar temple, Belur and Ekambaranatha temple at Kancheepuram), *vanjula* (Vanjaleswarar temple, Karur), *arjuna* (Marudhamalai temple, Maruthumalai), Jasmine or mullai (Garbha Rakshambigai temple, Thirukarugavur; Kodiyidai Nayaki Samedha Maasilamaniswarar temple, Thiumullaiyoyil and Kodhai Nayaki Samedha Mullaivaneswarar temple of Thirumullaivayil in Nagapattinam district) and so on (16, 17). In the Murukan temple of Marudhumalai, there is a custom that is still very prevalent; it is mandatory for the newly weds of the region to visit the temple and offer prayers to the deity and the *sthalavriksham*, which is an *arjuna* (*maruthu*) tree. Then on the fifth or seventh month of the first pregnancy, the couple visit the temple again with their relatives and they conduct the *seemantham* ceremony below the shade of the *sthalavriksha* (*arjuna/ maruthu*). The worship of the *sthalavriksha* is more prevalent in the South Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Adhra Pradesh.’ (*Seemantham* is a ceremony conducted usually on the 7<sup>th</sup> month of a woman’s pregnancy, followed mainly in the South Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka).

Alka Mai continued after a couple of minutes.

“During the evolution of human social life, family became the unit of society and the institution of marriage became an important social or even a socio-religious event of great significance. This ceremony was subsequently imported to the plant worship by the ancients through tree marriages, which still has not disappeared entirely. Humans often depicted plant behaviour as reflections of their own. Thus a jasmine creeper climbing on a mango tree was described by poets as a beautiful damsel clinging on to her lover, you may recollect Kalidasa’s lines in *Abhijnana Shakuntala*.

‘What a pretty pair they make. The jasmine shows her youth in her fresh flowers, and the mango-tree shows his strength in his ripening fruit’ and she stands there gazing at them.’

Later in the same drama we get the words of Kanva, the foster father of Sakuntala,

‘My child, you found the lover who  
Had long been sought by me;  
No longer need I watch for you;  
I’ll give the vine a lover true,  
This handsome mango tree.’ (18)

Perhaps India is the only country where tree marriages are celebrated, and so also the marriage between boys or girls to trees. Tree marriages are still being held, though rarely, between peepal and banyan, peepal and neem or between mango and *mahua*. In the last few years some such events were reported in the news papers. In many north Indian tribal communities girls and boys are married to certain plants before the actual marriage, with the intention of averting any ill luck that may arise from such a marriage. A widow can marry another man only after marrying a tree, and same is the case with a man intending to marry a widow. The plants mainly used for such marriages are banana, mango tree, madhuka, *sami* and *arka*. Such marriages have taken place even among the elites. (19, 20). Incidentally a girl — tree marrying ceremony was depicted in a movie titled ‘Sati’ by Aparna Sen in which a mute 19-year old brahmin girl was forced to marry a tree and the ceremony was graphically described by Elisabeth Bumiller.(21) The social evil of marrying girls to trees is very poignantly portrayed by Bharathi Mukherjee, the Indian diasporic novelist of America. Her book, *Tree Bride*, gives the story of how a five year old girl widow (her childhood husband died of snakebite) was married off to a sundari tree and how she lived as a tree bride for the rest of her life. Mukherjee recounted the story of this tree bride, by name Tara Lata, in her novel *Desirable Daughters*, a sequel to the *Tree Bride*. Let me quote a passage:

‘Then it’s time for the *shubha drishti*, the rite of auspicious gaze when the bride gets her first glimpse of the face of the man she is marrying....The bridal veil is lifted. Tara Lata straightens her bowed head, and raises her gaze slowly, very slowly. Her bridegroom is brave and steadfast. He has waited for her all night in the perilous wilderness. He has waited for her alone, unflinching, though deadly snakes slither out of the flooded holes at his feet, and leeches crawl across his toes, and crabs scuttle up his shins and predatory beasts gouge his solid stomach. The bridal gaze angles up his strong, slender torso as tall as a ship’s mast, and scales up, up, to where the tip of his head disappears in the night-black winter skies. She feels his arms, as strong as tree branches, brush against her, enfold her, shield her from life’s potential brutalities. The whispered lamentations were wrong. She is a woman cursed by a goddess and shunned like an outcaste by her community. She takes her greedy fill of the auspicious glimpse. And now she recognizes her bridegroom. He is the god of the Shooder Bon,\* the Beautiful Forest, come down to earth as a tree to save her from a lifetime of of disgrace and misery’ (22) [\* Sundari tree, also known as sundri and sunder; its scientific name is *Heritiera fomes*, shoe-flower family Malvaceae, (formerly included in Sterculiaceae). The name sunderbans has its root in the name of this tree].

Even now among the Brahmins, a tree branch, often from a *sami* tree, is planted in the venue of the marriage (marriage *pandal*), which is representative of the cosmic tree or the *axis mundi*. Both the bridegroom and bride worship the pillar before the actual marriage ceremony. Sometimes both the groom and the bride were initially married to a tree before the actual marriage. Such customs are followed for averting any ill luck that may befall on the man and woman.”

“Ellison Banks Findly has written a notable book titled *Plant Lives; Borderline Beings in Indian Traditions*. Chapter six of this book gives the lore related to plants, how man has imagined trees as abode of his deities, how trees influenced his social and religious life, stories about how man being transformed into trees and trees being transformed into humans and socio-religious rites such as tree marriages; homology between humans and plants, analogy between human bodies and plants, which popularly and widely adopted by

poets when they compare a woman's body with a creeper, her face with lotus, her eyes with lotus petals, her lips with ripe berries and buds, her mouth with lotus, her breasts with plums, wood apples and lotus buds, arms with creepers, hands with lotus, thighs with plantain, and feet with lotus. Innumerable are the examples for such comparisons:

'These lips of thine really bear similarity  
with the beauty of *bandhūka* flower.  
O Self-esteemed Lady!  
Thy comely cheeks compile the lustres of *madhūka*.  
Manifesting the beauty  
of *blue lotuses* are thy eyes that are lovely.  
The stature of *tila* flower, thy nose bears.  
Thy teeth, O my dear!  
Spread the radiance of *kunda* flower.  
Serving thy fine face with these five flowers,  
The Flower-shafted Love-god Cupid  
Conquers the entire universe indeed.'

In the Western world, the conventional tree worship is no more prevalent, however it has appeared in other formats in many regions. Such practices are the new forms of herbalism or can even be called as a shamanistic herbalism. Some plants and flowers are held sacred and such plants and flowers are believed to contribute to the spiritual and physical well being of the humans and are thus made use of in practices such as dreaming on a flower, meditation on a flower and ceremonial plant and flower dieting. Initiation ceremonies are practiced by the followers and ritualistic practices have been evolved for such initiations. This is a reemergent form of the Medieval druid and celtic tree cultures (dubbed as paganistic culture) prevalent in UK and other areas of northern Europe. The modern herbalistic shamanists like Carole Guyett, who wrote the book 'Sacred Plant Initiations' are of opinion that the concept is also related to the Sacred Ecology, a philosophy advocated by many nature lovers of the West. According to Gutt the most powerful plants (flowers which she names as 'key flowers'), are primrose, dogrose, oak, black thorn, angelica, dandelion and St John's wort. (24)

The people of the West still give credence to the meanings and symbolism associated with the many common flowers (see annexure 12). The traditions and cultures of beliefs related to the meanings and symbolism of flowers is a continuation of the medieval and the early modern age culture. In the Victorian Age such traditions and beliefs in the magical properties of plants and flowers were widespread. Gerena Dunwich in her book *Herbal Magick* published in 2002, writes:

'In contemporary times as it has been in the past, herbal magick remains an essential part of the Witches' craft. It can be used to assist an individual in attracting a compatible lover, landing the right job, changing bad luck into good, and even increasing one's wealth! Empowered by the energies of Goddess Earth and her elementals, herbs have long been used as amulets to protect against evil, dried and burned as magical incense during rituals, and added to flying ointments and cauldron brews.

Herbs can be used to cure or to curse, as well as to conjure or to banish supernatural entities. They can enchant our gardens and our homes, and guide us on the path to transformation and self –improvement. But most importantly herbal magick can open the door to spiritual realms and other worlds, and serve to connect a human being with Mother Nature and the Divine.’(25)

In short, people’s beliefs in the sacredness of plants continue to survive whether in India or in Europe and USA, the cradles of modernism and materialistic culture.

Now let me stop here unless you have some pertinent questions to ask. Mine is not a discourse on the multifaceted aspects of trees and tree worship. I was only trying to highlight certain points on the importance of tree worship in the Indian context. Of course we may be touching upon these aspects in the subsequent discussions.”

Alka Mai concluded her introduction.

“Mai, why are we offering flowers to deities, what is the special attribute of flower for such offerings?”

“Ravi, to answer that question we again should look into the symbolism of flowers. A flower is the finest creation of God, the most benevolent creation, found on this earth. A flower blooms not for its own fulfilment, it spreads happiness among the beholders, it sheds its fragrance that wafts in the air we breathe, and finally when it becomes a fruit it quenches hunger and thirst of humans, animals and birds. The flower becomes the symbol of beauty, benevolence, perfection, and purity. Flowers are the ‘wordless prayers of Nature’, beautiful expressions of its yearning for the Divine. And each flower has its unique aspiration, its own vibration, its true meaning,’ said the Mother of Aurobindo Āshram. She further says:

‘A flower contains all the elements of Nature air, water, fire, earth and ether. Apart from its beauty of form, colour, fragrance and texture there is something more an indefinable, subtle and mysterious quality about it. In the words of Liselle Raymond, “in its simplicity, it carries the vibrations of the *akasha* the ethereal element itself, that is, all that is most abstract, pure and perfect. It is, above everything else, the form, behind which is the sound, the all powerful creative *mantra*.’

‘Be like a Flower’ Mother advises:

‘Be like a flower. One must try to become like a flower: open, frank, equal, generous and kind. Do you know what it means?

A flower is open to all that surrounds it: Nature, light, the rays of the sun, the wind, etc. It exerts a spontaneous influence on all that is around it. It radiates a joy and a beauty.

It is frank: it hides nothing of its beauty, and lets it flow frankly out of itself. What is within, what is in its depths, it lets it come out so that everyone can see it.

It is equal: it has no preference. Everyone can enjoy its beauty and its perfume, without rivalry. It is equal and the same for everybody. There is no difference, or anything whatsoever.

Then generous: without reserve or restriction, how it gives the mysterious beauty and the very own perfume of Nature. It sacrifices itself entirely for our pleasure, even its life it sacrifices to express this beauty and the secret of the things gathered within itself.

And then, kind: it has such tenderness, it is so sweet, so close to us, so loving. Its presence fills us with joy. It is always cheerful and happy.

Happy is he who can exchange his qualities with the real qualities of the flowers. Try to cultivate in yourself their refined qualities'

The flower is also the symbol of all that is good in the worshipper; it is symbolic of his or her '*vasana*,' the totality of one's 'essence.' So by offering the flower we are offering to the deity ourselves. There is another symbolism also. You know a flower appeals to our '*manas*' (mind) and never to our '*buddhi*' (intellect). In other words flower is a symbol of our mind, our feelings, emotions, aspirations and everything the mind stands for. The 'mind' is also the seat of our self, our ego. Through the offering of flower we are surrendering our ego at the feet of God, surrendering ourselves with all the selfish feelings and thoughts at the feet of the deity. In other words it is symbolic of a total surrender of oneself at the feet of the deity. The life of a flower is ephemeral so also the body of a human. The ephemeral man offers his ephemeral life through the offering of flower at the feet of the eternal God.

In that remote past, when the primitive man looked around searching for things to offer to his primitive gods, there were no better choices than the flowers around: attractive, colourful, fragrant and pure. And he collected them and made the offering. Even now, after many millennia, we could not find a better substitute for offering to the gods we worship."

"Remember Mai continued, flowers are symbols; the true offering should come from the heart, and that involves the total submission of oneself and one's ego at the feet of God. The flowers that blossom out of the heart of the true devotees are said to be of eight types *ashta-vidam pushpam vishno preethi-karam bhaveth*]:

- The Flower of non-violence (*ahimsa pushpam*)
- The flower of control of the senses (*pushpam indriya nigraba*)
- The flower of compassion to all living beings (*sarva bhutha daya pushpam*)
- The flower of tolerance, patience and equality (*kshama pushpam visedhadha*)
- The flower of spiritual knowledge (*jnana pushpam*)
- The flower of inner spiritual flame-meditation (*tapa pushpam*)
- The flower of contemplation (*dhyana pushpam*)
- The flower of truth, the most delightful one (*satya pushpam*)

So, that is the meaning behind the offering of flowers. As I said, the life of a flower is so short, but it is so noble, so benevolent, so soothing to our aching hearts. Silently it blooms, silently it falls away, no complaints, no tears; it smiles when it blooms and smiling it fades away. A touching poem on flower is that of Khalil Gibran, and let me quote a few lines from this poem:

I am a kind word uttered and repeated  
By the voice of Nature;  
I am a star fallen from the  
Blue tent upon the green carpet.  
I am the daughter of the elements  
With whom Winter conceived;

To whom Spring gave birth; I was  
Reared in the lap of Summer and I  
Slept in the bed of Autumn.

.....  
I am the lover's gift; I am the wedding wreath;  
I am the memory of a moment of happiness;  
I am the last gift of the living to the dead;  
I am a part of joy and a part of sorrow.

.....  
But I look up high to see only the light,  
And never look down to see my shadow.  
This is wisdom which man must learn.' (26)

Let me conclude with Zenkei Shibayama's lines:

'Silently a flower blossom  
In silence it falls away;  
Yet here, now at this moment, at this place  
The world of the flower, the whole of  
The world is blooming.  
This is the talk of the flower, the truth  
Of the blossom:  
The glory of eternal life is fully shining here.' (27).

Now Ram, I think you can take over."

Alka Mai concluded her introduction and handed over the microphone to Ramji.

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