

The Significance of Trees in the Himalayan Region and in the Rig Veda

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Abstract

Trees are among the many elements of nature that are revered in the Rig Veda and honored by people living in the Himalayan region, as well as in other regions of the world. Consequently, this reverence pervades Himalayan culture. Trees are honored in many ways and revered for the strength they embody and for their role in enabling the worship of deities, as they are the source of wood for fires used in offerings, worship, and oblation. Trees are also honored for their essential role in enabling cooking fires and providing warmth.

This paper will offer a brief discussion of sacred trees in the Himalayan region and seek to examine the Rig Veda to determine the significance of trees as expressed in the text, exploring the various characteristics attributed to trees as described in the Rig Veda. For this purpose, the translations by Sri Aurobindo will be used primarily; however, translations by Ralph T. H. Griffith and Wendy Doniger will also be referenced.

Since trees provide the wood used in sacrificial fires, the paper will include a description of Agni, the fire god, and the spiritual seeker's honoring of him as essential to the spiritual quest and as the force behind evolution—both at the physical level and in the evolution of consciousness. Agni as a force for knowledge will be considered and addressed, especially as a force for spiritual knowledge and realization, with the transformative power that this implies.

Sources to be used include Hymns to the Mystic Fire and The Secret of the Veda, both works by Sri Aurobindo. Insights derived from these two books will be discussed as the analysis proceeds. Although the author is not familiar first-hand with the ceremonial rites associated with the Vedas, the paper will attempt to understand the psychological meaning and significance of the hymns and slokas as the descriptive analysis unfolds. Recognizing that the meaning is not readily apparent on the surface of the language and is often more symbolic and intuitive, the author will endeavor to explore the deeper meanings intended in the text.

Keywords: *Agni, Fire, Forests, Rig, Trees, Veda*

Introduction

Trees are among the many aspects of nature revered in the Rig Veda and honored by people living in the Himalayan region and other parts of the world. This reverence permeates Himalayan culture, where trees are celebrated for their strength and their roles in worship and daily life. They provide wood for sacrificial fires, offerings, and cooking, thus supporting both spiritual and practical needs. This paper explores the veneration of trees in Himalayan culture and examines the significance of trees as expressed in the Rig Veda.

Reverence for Trees as Sacred Entities

A well-known mantra from the Rig Veda (6.48.17) states: “Do not trouble the tree. Do not uproot or cut them. They provide protection to animals, birds, and other living beings” (Dahaliwal, 2023). This sentiment reflects the general reverence for trees in the Himalayan region. For example, the deodar cedar (*Cedrus deodara*), prevalent in Western Nepal, is considered a divine tree. The prevalence of tree deities, such as yakshis or yakshinis and their male counterparts, yaksharas, also indicates the significance of trees in the region and in Hinduism. These tree or nature deities are also acknowledged by other religions in the region, including Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. They appear in the folktales of Kashmiri Muslims and are associated with sacred groves, especially in India (Singh, Youssouf, et al., 2017).

For practitioners of Hinduism, several sacred trees are honored and respected. Among them is the Akshayavata, the sacred fig tree, believed to free worshippers from sin. This tree is purportedly located within the Patalpuri Temple at Prayagraj Fort, Uttar Pradesh. However, there is some debate about whether this particular tree is the one referred to in the Puranas (Ashyavata, 2023). Another significant tree is the Asvatta, often considered a sacred fig tree and also known as the pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*). This is the variety of fig tree under which the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment. The Bodhi Tree, situated within the sacred Maya Devi Temple complex in Lumbini, Nepal, is revered by both Hindus and Buddhists and is estimated to be over 2,500 years old. This association has likely led to the high demand for Bodhi chitta seeds, also known as Buddha chitta, used in prayer malas (Bhusal, 2016).

The banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*), native to the Indian subcontinent, is another tree of great significance. Its adventitious aerial roots, which support its branches, can extend extensively and encompass a wide area. The kalpavriksha, or wish-fulfilling tree, a type of banyan, is sacred in several religions and is mentioned in the Vedic texts (Author, Year). Additionally, sacred groves and various tree deities are associated with specific types of trees, such as the Ashvattha (banyan) tree linked with Brahma and the Palasha (*Butea monosperma*) tree associated with the god Agni. It is also said that Valmiki composed the Ramayana under a Palasha tree (Author, Year). These are just a few examples of the numerous sacred trees and groves.

Sacred groves in the Himalayan region, including Nepal, date back to or even before the time of the Rig Veda. Shrestha and Devkota note that “it has been believed that sacred virgin forests date back to several thousands of years when human society was in a primitive state, and all forms of vegetation in the sacred groves were supposed to be under the protection of the reigning deity of that grove, with the removal of even a small twig being taboo” (Shrestha & Devkota, 2013, p. 72). Among the sacred groves related to Hinduism are the Pashupati Sacred Grove at the Lord Pashupatinath Temple, estimated to be about 1,400 years old, and the Bajrabarahi Sacred Grove in the southeast Kathmandu Valley, associated with the goddess Bajrabarahi (Shrestha&Devkota, 2010, p. 216). Both groves are also noted as bird-watching sites. Sacred groves are typically associated with presiding deities, who may be major gods and goddesses or lesser-known ones, and they are often sites of rituals, folk tales, and local lore. Nepal’s Forest Act of 1992 defines a religious or sacred forest as: “A forest area that has been legally handed over to legally registered religious groups, communities, or organizations to carry out and continue traditional religious activities by sustainably utilizing its resources as described in its management plan” (Shrestha & Devkota, 2013, p. 72).

Sacred groves and forests are well-recognized in the environmental community for their role in habitat protection. For example, in the Rig Veda, forests are described as Aranyani, the mother goddess who ensures food availability for humankind and takes care of wildlife. Sacred sites are likely among the oldest forms of habitat protection and form a vast, though often underappreciated, network of sanctuaries worldwide. Some researchers estimate that sacred sites may be as numerous as protected areas (Anthwal, Gupta, et al., 2010, p. 962; WWF, 2005).

The Rig Veda includes a hymn dedicated to Aranyani, honoring her as the goddess of forests and protector of wild animals:

1. Goddess of wild and forest, who seemest to vanish from sight, How is it that thou seekest not the village? Art thou not afraid?
2. When the grasshopper replies and swells the shrill cicada'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 savory 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 Rig Veda/Mandala 10/Hymn 146)

In Tibet, the mountain KhawaKarmo is considered sacred and is renowned for its rich biodiversity. Many sites within the mountain are regarded as sacred (Salick, Amend, et al., 2007, p. 693). Studies of sacred groves in other Himalayan regions, such as Sikkim, reveal that India may have as many as 100,000 sacred groves (Acharya & Ormsby, 2017, p. 232). A Buddhist sacred site in Bhutan, Kurje Temple near Chamkhar town, features a sacred cypress tree said to have originated from Guru Rinpoche's walking stick (Daily Bhutan, 2023, retrieved October 2, 2023).

Trees Enable Wood Fires of Offering

Offering wood fires and their smoke to deities may evolve into worshipping the fire itself and, by extension, the tree that provides the wood. Tree deities make such worship appropriate. A verse that praises trees for their hidden potential to enable fire is:

5.11.6. Thee, O Fire, the Angiras sought and found hidden in the secrecy lodging in tree and tree; by our pressure on thee thou art born a mighty force, the Son of Force they call thee, O Angiras! (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 276)

Another verse interprets the tree's potential for fire, indicating that all fruits make worthy offerings to the gods:

3.4.10. O tree, release thy yield to the gods; Fire the achiever of the work speeds the offering on its way. It is he who does worship as the priest of the call, the more true in his act because he knows the birth of the gods. (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 170)

Omnipresent Divinity

The omnipresence of the Divine is well-expressed in the following verse:

7.4.5. He who has come to his native seat made by the gods, Fire delivered the gods by his will; the plants and the trees and the earth bear him who is the foundation of all (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 307).

Trees as Protectors

Trees are seen as protectors of humans and their homes in these verses:

8.23.25. The guest of men, the son of the Trees, the illumined seers praise for his protection, the ancient Fire. (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 342)

10.46.7. His ageless and purifying fires are the defenders of our homes, lifting their luminous smoke; white-flaming, dwellers in the Tree, they are our strengtheners and supporters and like winds and like wine. (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 414)

8.19.33. O Fire, other fires dwell dependent on thee as on a tree its branches; I annex to me the illuminations of men and their lights, increasing so thy warrior forces. (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 337)

Agni Hidden in the Trees

Sri Aurobindo asserts that Agni is present in trees and plants:

Agni is hidden in the trees and plants; he is the secret heat and fire in everything that grows on earth. All that we take pleasure in in the material life could not be or grow without the presence of the secret flame of the spirit. The awakening of the fire by the friction of the Aranis, the rubbing together of two pieces of

tinder-wood, is one way of making Agni shine out in his own form. However, this is said elsewhere to have been the work of the Angiras Rishis. Here the making of Agni shine is attributed to Apnavana and the Bhrigus, with no indication of the method. (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 694)

Sri Aurobindo further elaborates on Agni's significance:

It is true that here the light is concealed. Agni, like other gods, figures here as a child of the universal parents, Heaven and Earth, Mind and Body, Soul and material Nature. This earth holds him concealed in her own materiality and does not release him for the conscious works of the Father. She hides him in all her growths, her plants, herbs, trees—the forms full of her heats, the objects that keep for the soul its delights. But at last, she shall yield him up; she is the lower tinder, the mental being is the upper tinder; by the pressure of the upper on the lower, the flame of Agni shall be born. Therefore he is called the Son of Force. Agni, the Divine Will-Force. (Sri Aurobindo, 2009, p. 389)

The wood of trees symbolizes Agni, bridging humanity and the divine, representing aspiration and devotion. This divine presence in trees symbolizes Nature's aspiration toward heaven.

Hymn to Agni

This hymn expresses the ardent aspiration associated with Agni:

HYMN IV. Agni.

1. To thee will send praise and bring oblation, as thou hast merited lauds when we invoked thee. A fountain in the desert art thou, Agni, O Ancient King, to man who fain would worship.
2. Thou unto whom resort the gathered people, as the kine seek the warm stall, O Most Youthful. Thou art the messenger of Gods and mortals, and goest glorious with thy light between them.
3. Making thee grow as 'twere some noble infant, thy Mother nurtures thee with sweet affection. Over the desert slopes thou passest longing, and seekest, like some beast set free, thy fodder.

4. Foolish are we, O Wise and free from error: verily, Agni, thou dost know thy grandeur. There lies the form: he moves and licks, and swallows, and, as House-Lord, kisses the Youthful Maiden.
5. He rises ever fresh in ancient fuel: smoke-bannered, gray, he makes the wood his dwelling. No swimmer, Steer, he presses through the waters, and to his place accordant mortals bear him.
6. Like thieves who risk their lives and haunt the forest, the twain with their ten girdles have secured him. This is a new hymn meant for thee, O Agni: yoke as it were thy car with parts that glitter.
7. Homage and prayer are thine, O Jātavedas, and this my song shall evermore exalt thee. Agni, protect our children and descendants, and guard with ever-watchful care our bodies. (Griffith, 1896).

Another verse encapsulates the aspiration and Agni's presence in trees:

15.2. The Bhrigus set in the Tree the godhead of our aspiration with his high flame of light like a friend well-confirmed in his place. And now, O Wonderful, well-pleased in him who has cast to thee the offering, thou art magnified by wordings of thy power from day to day. (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 726).

The Knowledge of Trees

Sri Aurobindo delves into the intrinsic knowledge within trees, noting their evolution and manifestation as part of a divine conception. He explains:

... the evolution of the right tree out of the right seed is as inevitable as Fate, although the tree has no knowledge and control of its own growth; but the evolution & the form of the tree evolved are merely manifestations of the divine conception. The Cosmic Self-Consciousness knows itself in the form of a Tree & that vijnána or tyal idea is manifested by the sure action of the nature or swabhava attached to the conception. This sureness of self-fulfilment based on a secret self-knowledge is the kratu or action of Agni, the divine Power in things. It is a secret Will in things fulfilling itself in motion of activity & in form. But though Agni in the tree knows, the tree knows nothing. (Sri Aurobindo, 2009, p. 716)

The potential of trees and their latent knowledge is also reflected in the Rig Veda. In verse 3.1.20, it is stated:

Fire, the knower of all things born, is hymned by our paeans in the house as if in one that walks on the way. He feeds on the Tree and conquers by our will like a war-horse; this shining Bull is adored by us with sacrifice like a father. (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 75)

Similarly, Mandala Five, Sukta 10, highlights the special knowledge of trees:

O Tree, there where thou knowest the secret names of the gods make rich our offerings. (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 265)

This verse suggests that trees possess hidden knowledge and power that enriches human offerings to the gods.

Trees and Offering

Trees play a crucial role in creating the wood fires used for offerings to the gods. Their significance in this context is highlighted in various Rig Vedic verses. For example, Mandala Five emphasizes the value of wood for sacrificial fires:

Unoppressed thou art born brilliant-pure from the mothers twain, a rapturous priest of the call thou hast risen up from the sun; they have increased thee with the offering of light, O Fire, fed with the oblation and thy smoke has become a ray of intuition lodged in heaven. (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 275)

Additional verses demonstrate the importance of trees in sacrificial rituals:

O Tree, knowing the goal of the journeyings of the gods, bear us to it binding with the radiant cord. May the godhead fashion the offerings in which he takes pleasure: may heaven and earth protect our call. (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 422)

Revealing by thy self-power the goal of the gods, release towards it in the order of the Truth our offerings. Let the tree and the divine accomplisher of the work and the Fire take the taste of the offering with the sweetness and the light. (Sri Aurobindo, 2014, p. 437)

Wisdom from Trees

The Rig Veda also contains a parable involving a tree. In verses 1.164.20-22, two birds sit on a tree branch, one eating the fruit and the other merely observing. The first bird represents the individual soul (jiva) with desires, while the second bird symbolizes the Paramatman, the aspect of divinity beyond desires and immortal. This parable emphasizes the attributes of desirelessness and union with the Divine:

Two birds associated together, and mutual friends, take refuge in the same tree; one of them eats the sweet fig; the other abstaining from food, merely looks on. (Johnson, 1976, p. 248)

Where the smooth-gliding rays, cognizant, distil the perpetual portion of water; there has the Lord and steadfast protector all beings accepted me, though immature in wisdom. (Johnson, 1976, p. 251)

In the tree into which the smooth-gliding rays feeders on the sweet, enters, and again bring forth light over all, they have called the fruit sweet, but he partakes not of it who knows not the protector of the universe. (Johnson, 1976, p. 258)

Conclusion

In summary, trees hold profound significance in Hinduism and other religions, as well as within the cultural practices of the Himalayan region. Their symbolism, deeply rooted in Rig Vedic traditions, highlights their sacredness and the reverence they command. The influence of Agni, as articulated by Sri Aurobindo, underscores the profound respect and honor accorded to trees. According to Sri Aurobindo, trees embody Agni's presence and, consequently, are revered as sacred entities (Sri Aurobindo, 2009, p. 716; Sri Aurobindo, 2014, pp. 75, 265).

Trees are not merely physical objects but symbols of human aspiration and devotion. They serve as a bridge between the earthly and the divine, reflecting both spiritual and material realms. By honoring trees, we acknowledge their role in embodying divine qualities and their symbolic representation of human longing for the divine. This reverence connects them to the celestial and sacred, reinforcing their status as symbols of aspiration and devotion in the spiritual landscape.

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