



Culture: A Conventional Safeguard for Environmental Protection

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Abstract

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world, and it has a rich tradition of worshipping nature as a manifestation of the divine. Hindu scriptures, such as the Vedas and the Upanishads, describe the underlying oneness of all existence, and the sacred presence of Brahman, the supreme reality, in every aspect of creation. Hinduism also recognizes various deities, avatars, and ancestors, who are associated with different trees, plants, animals, and birds. These are revered and worshipped by the devotees, who believe that they can receive blessings, protection, and prosperity from them. Hinduism also prescribes various rituals, ceremonies, and practices, such as offering flowers, fruits, and food, tying threads, lighting lamps, and chanting mantras, to express gratitude and devotion to the natural world. Hinduism also promotes the conservation and preservation of nature, as it considers it to be a sacred duty and a moral obligation. Hinduism has influenced the culture and ethos of India, where many sacred groves, forests, rivers, mountains, and animals are protected and respected by the people. Hinduism also has commonalities with other religions, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, which also share a reverence for nature and a concern for the environment. Hinduism, therefore, offers a unique and holistic perspective on the role of worship of plants, trees, animals, and birds, and its implications for the human-nature relationship.

Keywords: Hinduism, Vedas, worship, trees, plants, animals, birds, conservation and preservation of nature, the human-nature relationship.

Introduction

*“Do not trouble trees. Do not uproot or cut them. They protect animals, birds, and other living beings.”*¹

Environment is everything that surrounds us. Today, everyone is concerned with the protection and preservation of the environment. It is one of the most eloquent demonstrations of how all human activities on this planet are inextricably linked. Humans and other organisms live in an environment made up of physical and biological elements. It means the entire range of external influences acting on an organism, both the physical and biological and other organisms, forces of nature surrounding an individual. It is a bag of natural entities like human beings, animals, plants, trees etc. We find that there is some danger in their existence due to pollution called Environmental pollution which is now a global problem. The whole world is trying to deal with this problem, but it is becoming worse day by day.

The environment is being damaged somewhere by war bombs, somewhere by indiscriminate industrialization, somewhere by smoke from uncontrolled vehicles, somewhere by unnecessary noise. In this essay, I want to argue that human efforts alone are not enough to fight environmental pollution. We also need to

¹ Rig Veda 6:48:17

² Encyclopedia Britannica



preserve our **traditions** and **culture** which have been beneficial for environmental protection for centuries. These traditions include the worship of trees and plants, worship of birds and animals as well as Yagya and Havans which have been performed for centuries, which in some way or another help us in keeping the environment pure.

Trees and plants are considered pious and religious in Hinduism. They play a significant role in protecting the environment. According to Hindu mythology, in various ceremonies trees, plants, animals and birds are considered sacred, auspicious, and symbolic of various deities and virtues. These are unavoidable and essential parts of Indian Hindu Culture and traditions. Some of the traditions can be referred to as under:

Tulasi Vivaha: This is a ritual that celebrates the marriage of the Tulasi plant with the Shaligrama (a sacred stone representing a Vishnu) or the amla branch (Indian gooseberry) on the eleventh day of the bright half of the month of Kartika (usually in November). This marks the beginning of the wedding season in India, as it is believed that Tulasi is the incarnation of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, and her marriage to Vishnu ensures the happiness and well-being of all married couples.³

Marriage with a Tree: This is the practice of marrying a person (usually a woman) to a tree (usually a Banyan, Peepal, or Mango) before marrying a human partner. This is done to ward off any astrological or planetary influences that may cause harm or misfortune to the human marriage. For example, if a woman is born under the influence of Mars (mangal dosha), she is considered to be a Manglik and may bring bad luck or death to her husband. To avoid this, she is first married to a tree, which is then cut down, symbolically ending the marriage, and freeing her from the curse. This practice is also done for other reasons, such as to protect the bride from evil spirits, to ensure fertility, or to fulfil a vow.⁴

Tree as God and Goddess: Many trees are associated with different gods and goddesses in Hinduism, and are revered and worshipped as their manifestations. For example, the banyan tree is a symbol of life and fertility and is linked to Shiva, the god of destruction and regeneration. The pipal tree is considered to be the abode of Vishnu, the preserver and protector of the world, and is also the tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment. The neem tree is connected to Shitala Mata, the goddess of poxes and diseases, and is valued for its medicinal properties. The mango tree is a sign of love and fertility and is related to Kamadeva, the god of desire, and Parvati, the goddess of power and beauty. The banana tree is a representation of Lakshmi and is used to decorate the wedding venue. The coconut tree is a symbol of prosperity and abundance and is offered to various gods and goddesses. The turmeric plant is a mark of purity and auspiciousness and is used to adorn the bride and groom.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tulasi_Vivaha

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_marriage



Sacred Groves: These are patches of forest or woodland that are preserved and protected as the dwelling places of various spirits and deities. They are considered to be sacred and inviolable, and no one is allowed to cut, graze, or harvest anything from them. They are also the sites of various rituals and festivals, especially those related to fertility and nature worship. They are believed to be the original temples of India, where people connected with the divine through nature.

Khejari Puja: Khejari Puja is a ritual of worshipping the Khejari tree, which is considered sacred and auspicious in Rajasthan, especially in the Thar desert. The khejari tree, also known as Shami or Janti, is a symbol of life, fertility, and prosperity, and is associated with various gods and goddesses in Hinduism.

Khejari puja is performed for different reasons by different communities in Rajasthan. Among the ruling elite, Khejari puja was a pre-war ritual, and even today there is an annual Khejari puja among the Rajput community at Dussehra. Among the tribal communities, the Bishnoi tribe is well known for its rigid ‘eco-religion’ that holds all life forms including trees to be sacred. They perform Khejari puja to protect the tree from being cut or harmed by anyone. Khejari puja is also done by farmers and pastoralists to seek blessings for their crops and cattle, and by women to pray for the well-being of their husbands and children.

Khejari puja involves offering water, milk, flowers, fruits, incense, and vermilion to the tree, and chanting mantras and prayers. Sometimes, a small idol of a deity is placed under the tree and worshipped along with the tree. The worshipers also tie sacred threads or cloth pieces around the trunk or branches of the tree as a mark of devotion and gratitude. They also seek forgiveness from the tree for any harm or injury they may have caused to it, and pledge to protect and conserve it.

The Worship by Bail Patra: Bail Patra also known as Bilva leaf or bel leaf, is a sacred leaf that is offered to Lord Shiva as a form of worship. It is believed that the Bilva tree grew from the sweat drops of Goddess Parvati, who is the consort of Lord Shiva. The trifoliate shape of the leaf represents the three eyes of Lord Shiva, the three gunas (qualities) of sattva, rajas, and tamas, and the three syllables of AUM. Offering a Bilva leaf to Lord Shiva is said to bring blessings, prosperity, and liberation. It is also valued for its medicinal and healing properties in Ayurveda, the ancient system of Indian medicine.

The worship of the Rudraksh Tree: The Rudraksh Tree’s worship is a way of expressing gratitude and love to Lord Shiva, and seeking his grace and blessings. It is also a way of connecting with the cosmic energy and the natural elements and harmonizing the body, mind, and soul.⁵

The Worship of The Peepal Tree: The Peepal tree also known as the sacred fig, is one of the most auspicious trees in Hindu mythology. It is believed to represent the three supreme gods- Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva. The roots symbolize Brahma, the creator; the trunk symbolizes Vishnu, the preserver; and the leaves symbolize

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudraksha>

Shiva, the destroyer. The Peepal tree is also the tree under which Gautam Buddha attained enlightenment and is therefore revered by Buddhists as well.

People worship the Peepal tree by offering water, milk, flowers, incense, and vermilion to it. They also light a lamp or a diya under the tree and chant mantras and prayers. They believe that by doing so, they can get rid of various doshas (flaws) from their horoscope, and attain blessings, prosperity, and protection from negative energies. Some people also tie a red thread or cloth around the tree as a mark of devotion and gratitude.

The Peepal tree is also valued for its medicinal and healing properties in Ayurveda, the ancient system of Indian medicine. It is used to treat various ailments, such as digestive disorders, skin diseases, fever, and infections. It is also a source of antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals.

The Banyan Tree Puja: The banyan tree, also known as the Vata-Vriksha, is sacred in Hindu religion. It is believed to represent the three supreme gods- Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. The roots symbolize Brahma, the creator; the trunk symbolizes Vishnu, the preserver; and the leaves symbolize Shiva, the destroyer. The banyan tree is also associated with Yama, the god of death, and is often planted near crematoriums. It is believed to be the abode of ghosts and spirits.⁶

The Ashoka Tree Puja: The Ashoka tree is a sacred and beautiful tree that is worshipped in the Hindu religion for its various associations with gods, goddesses, and virtues. Some of the ways that the Ashoka tree is worshipped are:

It is celebrated in Chaitra, the first month of the Hindu calendar, as a sign of joy and happiness. It is dedicated to Kama Deva, the god of love, who included an Ashoka blossom among the five flowers in his quiver. The tree is a symbol of love and its flowers are used in temple decoration. It is believed that Lord Buddha was born under the Ashoka tree, so it is planted in Buddhist monasteries as well. It is offered water, milk, flowers, incense, and vermilion by the devotees, who seek blessings, prosperity, and protection from the tree.

There are some flowers⁷ which are used in worship. They are an integral part of Hindu worship, as they please the mind and grant prosperity. Different flowers are offered to different gods and goddesses, depending on their symbolism, colour, fragrance, and association. Some of the common flowers used in Hindu worship are:

Marigold: This bright yellow or orange flower is offered to Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of beginnings and remover of obstacles. It is also used to decorate temples and homes during festivals and ceremonies.

Hibiscus: This red or pink flower is offered to Goddess Kali, the fierce form of the goddess Parvati, who fights the demons that threaten the cosmic order. It represents her tongue and her fierceness.

⁶ <https://www.sanskritimagazine.com/sanctity-banyan-tree-hinduism/>

⁷ <https://dharma.werindia.com/7-divine-flowers-you-must-include-while-worshipping-hindu-deities/>



Lotus: This elegant and pure flower is offered to Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, and her consort Lord Vishnu, the preserver and protector of the world. It is also a symbol of enlightenment, as Lord Buddha was born under a lotus tree.

Jasmine: This fragrant and delicate flower is offered to Goddess Saraswati, the goddess of learning and arts, and her consort Lord Brahma, the creator of the world. It is also a symbol of love and beauty.

Parijata flower or Night-flowering coral Jasmine is a divine flower whose roots are in heaven since it is a Vishnu flower. This flower is believed to be the favourite of Lord Vishnu, Goddess Laxmi, and their incarnations. According to Hindu mythology, this tree came out as a result of the churning of the ocean by the Gods and demons. Lord Indra found this tree and brought it to heaven where its beautiful and fragrant flowers spread beneath the tree and pleased the Gods.

Palash: The Goddess of Knowledge who wears a white saree and sits on a white Lotus, Devi Saraswati is fond of Palash flowers. Although all white coloured flowers are liked by Devi Saraswati, Palash flowers are considered to be the essential component in Saraswati puja. The worship of Devi Saraswati is considered incomplete without Palash flowers.

Rose is a flower that is used in worship in many religions, including Hinduism. It is a symbol of love, beauty, devotion, and purity. In Hinduism, a rose is offered to various deities, such as Ganesha, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Parvati. It is also used to decorate temples and homes during festivals and ceremonies. Rose is associated with the goddess Lakshmi, who is often depicted sitting on a lotus flower surrounded by roses. Rose is also a sign of gratitude and respect and is given to elders and teachers as a mark of honour.

Like plants, trees and flowers, birds and animals are revered and worshipped in Hindu culture as manifestations of various gods and goddesses, symbols of virtues and qualities, and messengers of the divine. Some examples of worship of birds in Hindu culture are:⁸

Garuda: Garuda is the king of birds and the mount of Vishnu, the preserver and protector of the world. He has the body of a man and the head, wings, and talons of an eagle. He is a symbol of strength, courage, loyalty, and devotion. He is also the enemy of snakes, which represent evil forces. Garuda is worshipped as a guardian and a saviour, and his image is often placed at the entrance of temples.

Jatayu: Jatayu is a noble vulture who tried to rescue Sita from Ravana, the demon king who abducted her. He fought valiantly against Ravana but was fatally wounded. He managed to inform Rama, Sita's husband, about her whereabouts before dying. He is a symbol of sacrifice, bravery, and righteousness. He is worshipped as a martyr and a hero, and his place of death is a pilgrimage site.

⁸ W. J. Wilkins, Hindu Mythology, Vedic and Puranic, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co.; London: W. Thacker & Co.[1900]



Shuka: Shuka is a wise parrot who narrated the Mahabharata, the epic of the Kurukshetra war, to King Parikshit, the grandson of Arjuna, one of the main protagonists. He is a symbol of knowledge, eloquence, and memory. He is worshipped as a sage and a teacher, and his voice is considered auspicious.

Kalavinka: Kalavinka is a celestial bird who sings the praises of the Buddha. He has the head of a human and the body of a bird. He is a symbol of joy, beauty, and harmony. He is worshipped as a musician and a poet, and his song is said to have the power to awaken enlightenment.

Cow: The cow is considered to be the mother of all living beings, and a symbol of fertility, wealth, and generosity. The cow is also associated with various deities, such as Shiva, Indra, and Lakshmi. The cow is revered and protected, and killing or harming a cow is a grave sin.⁹

Snake: The snake is a symbol of power, wisdom, and transformation. The snake is also linked to Shiva, who wears a cobra around his neck, and Vishnu, who rests on a serpent called Shesha. The snake is worshipped as a guardian and a healer, and snake temples are common in India.

Peacock: The peacock is a symbol of beauty, grace, and joy. The peacock is also related to Saraswati, the goddess of learning and arts, and Kartikeya, the god of war and son of Shiva. The peacock is admired and celebrated, and its feathers are used as ornaments and offerings.

Swan: The swan is a symbol of purity, elegance, and discernment. The swan is also connected to Brahma, the creator god, and Saraswati, his consort. The swan is respected and honoured, and its image is often depicted in Hindu art and literature.

Elephants: Elephants are worshipped in Hinduism as manifestations of various gods and goddesses, symbols of virtues and qualities, and messengers of the divine. Ganesha is the elephant-headed god of beginnings, who is traditionally worshipped before any major enterprise and is the patron of intellectuals, bankers, scribes, and authors. Indra is the king of gods and the lord of thunder, who rides on a white elephant called Airavata.

Lions: Lions are worshipped in Hinduism. Narasimha is the fourth avatar of Vishnu, who incarnated in the form of a man lion to kill the tyrant Hiranyakashipu, who had obtained a boon that made him invincible to any human or animal. Narasimha is a symbol of divine wrath, justice, and courage. Durga is usually shown riding a lion or a tiger, which represents her power, majesty, and grace. She is also the goddess of victory and is invoked for protection and strength.¹⁰

The trees, plants, flowers, birds, and animals mentioned above are just examples. In fact, in the Hindu religion, every tree, plant, flower, bird, or animal is worshipable and equal to a god or goddess. When, scientifically we observe the role of these

⁹ <https://www.sanskritimagazine.com/sacred-animals-hinduism/>

¹⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narasimha>



plants and trees¹¹ we find that they play a vital role in maintaining a clean and healthy environment. Their role can be judged by the following mentioned benefits for the environment, such as:

- They balance the air quality by making oxygen and taking in carbon dioxide through photosynthesis. This reduces the greenhouse effect and climate change. Plants also remove other harmful substances and chemicals from the air and keep them away from humans and animals.
- They control the water cycle by releasing water vapour into the air through transpiration. This forms clouds and rain that supply water for all living beings. Plants also protect the soil from erosion and water from contamination by holding the soil in place and filtering the water that flows through their roots.
- They cool the earth by absorbing and reflecting heat and providing shade. Plants lower the air and land temperature by taking in and bouncing back sunlight. They also create zones of cooler air in forests and other green areas that make the environment more pleasant for humans and wildlife.
- They offer habitats and food for wildlife and humans. Plants are the main food source for the food chain and sustain many other living creatures. They create diverse ecosystems that support a variety of species and enhance biodiversity. Plants also offer many resources for humans, such as food, medicine, fibre, fuel, and beauty.
- They take in carbon dioxide and other harmful gases from the air and make oxygen through photosynthesis. This lowers the greenhouse effect and climate change. Plants also clean the air from dust and particulate matter and keep them in their leaves or roots.
- They catch heat and give shade. Plants cool the air and the land by absorbing and bouncing back sunlight. They also make areas of cooler air in forests and other green places that make the environment more comfortable for humans and wildlife.

Birds and animals are beneficial for the environment in many ways. Some of the benefits are¹²:

- They pollinate plants, which are essential for food production, biodiversity, and human well-being.
- They disperse seeds of different plants, which helps maintain forest diversity, regeneration, and resilience.
- They control insect and rodent populations, which prevents outbreaks of pests and diseases that can harm crops, livestock, and human health.

¹¹ Turner-Skoff, Jessica & Cavender, Nicole. (2019). The benefits of trees for livable and sustainable communities. *Plants, People, Planet*. 1. 323-335. 10.1002/ppp3.39.

¹² Pushpa Choudhary, Importance of Animals and Birds in Our Environment: Review Based Perspective, *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, ISSN 2582-7421



- They decompose organic matter and recycle nutrients, which enriches the soil and supports plant growth.
- They create or modify habitats for themselves and other species, which increases habitat diversity and complexity.¹³

By providing these ecosystem services, birds and animals also contribute to human welfare, livelihoods, and culture. Therefore, conserving birds and animals is not only a moral duty but also a smart investment for our future.

In the legal framework and constitutional parameters, there are various safeguards have been mentioned under the constitution of India to protect the environment by saving wildlife and plants. Article 21, Article 48-A, Article 51-A, (g), Article 14, Article 19, Article 47, Article 48, Article 253.

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¹³ Jonathan Franzen, National Geographic magazine, January 2018