

SACRED TREES AMONG THE TAMIL PEOPLE OF SOUTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT

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Among the Tamil people of South India the veneration of trees and forests still occupies an important part of their daily life. Once recognized as the abode of a local deity, trees are not allowed to be harmed or felled except for religious purposes such as for the repairing of a temple or shrine: sanctification is based on religious sentiments and cultural values, and also linked to ecology. Sacred trees are protected because people fear the anger of the gods that have their abode in them. People also worship trees because they hope that the power and fertility contained in them may be transferred into human life and sacred groves are often protected by local communities. Mostly sacred groves protect important watershed areas that deliver the important water resource to the communities. However, traditional values among others are decreasing due to a growth in urbanisation that is leading to the degradation and disappearance of sacred sites.

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Keywords: Sacred trees, sacred groves, village deities, Tamil Nadu, veneration.

Introduction

For the Hindus all life is sacred. The divine soul is believed to permeate all that exists in nature: stones, plants, animals and humans. It is most likely that the indigenous people of India worshipped trees and groves before the arrival of the Aryans in the Indus valley about 1500–1200 BC. They respected trees for their auspiciousness and the numerous benefits derived from them in the form of food, fodder, medicine and firewood. At home in the steppes of central Asia, the Aryans were confronted with an immense vista of unspoiled forests and rivers when they arrived at the plains of the Indus valley. Vedic Brāhmanism is a historical predecessor of modern Hinduism, to be understood as the beliefs and practices propagated by the Brāhmanic priests (*brahmins*), the highest spiritual authority for Hindus, which was developed by the early Aryans and propagated through the sacred language of Sanskrit (Lipner 1994).

In the Vedic texts of the Rig-Veda, the Law of Manu or Mānava Dharma Śāstra (1200–500 BC), trees and plants are imbued with consciousness (Manu I.49) and they even experience pleasure and pain (Bühler 1886). However, trees have also been seen as inauspicious and mystic: a domicile both for guardian or evil and demonic spirits. Their roots penetrate deep into the mysterious earth while their branches stretch up towards the endless sky, making them secretive and suspicious (Nugteren 2005).

Before the Vedic period, forests were experienced as the home of wild forces of animal and vegetative life, beyond the control of village life guided by the priests. A division was perceived between orderly village life controlled by the *Brahmins* (priests) who guided the people in the practice of *dharmā* (the cosmic law that refers to the duty of human beings to their family, to society, humanity, nature and towards God), and the *adharmic* world of the forests (that which is not in accord with the law of *dharmā*) over which the priests had no control. The *brahmins* were seen as the transformers of the forces between men and gods, heaven and earth that have been awakened by the power of ritual sacrifices. The centre of the relation between heavenly forces and men was the sacrificial post, a wooden pillar to which sacrificial animals were tied before they were offered to the gods. Thus the 'axis mundi' was man-made and not a tree in nature. While the religious village life was still under the control of the Vedic priests, the deep forest (*āraṇya*) was becoming a place for spiritual seekers who doubted the hegemony of the village priests (Nugteren 2005).

The forest was the home of indigenous tribes with their strange and different life, very different to that experienced in controlled village existence. It was also the residence of hermits and *sādhus* (holy men) who were known and feared for their ascetic powers that could harm people if their anger were aroused. The onset of the Vedic period (1500 BC–500 BC) changed the perception of forests in people's minds and, through the epics of *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* in which forest exile is one of the central themes, they became places of exile for heroes of the narratives rather than only fearsome and mystic. Now forests became associated with holy men and sages who were honoured for their extreme surrender to the law of *dharmā*, the righteous path, referring to the duties a human being needs to fulfil to family, society, nature and gods in order to gain spiritual fulfilment (Dwivedi 2000).

In the Vana Parva, the book of the forest of the *Mahābhārata* (1883–1896), the Pandavas, five princely brothers and their common wife Draupadi, were forced to spend 13 years in exile in the Naimisha Forest on the banks of the Gomati River in Uthar Pradesh. The heroes of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma and Sita, and Rāma's brother Lakṣmana had to live their exile years in the deep tropical deciduous forest. The beauty of the forests was described by Vālmiki in several verses in the *Āraṇyakas* (Forest books) of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In the epic, the forest is sanctified as a mystic place where spiritual seekers search refuge in *āśrama* (a place of refuge or hermitage) for the perfection and the state of *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation). The forests in which Rama the hero and Sita the heroine were dwelling also made those places sacred just through their bare presence (Lee 2000).

The Brāhmanic influence of the Aryan invaders started to spread from the Indus valley of West India (today Pakistan) towards the east of the country along the Ganges River, and then slowly expanded towards the south. The Dravidian tribes, the indigenous people living in the region of the contemporary states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala, had their own systems of belief and worship. They were the ancient inhabitants of India before the advent of the Aryans started to spread the influence of the Brāhmanic religion throughout the entire country. The communities of the Dravidians in the South were split into small clans consisting of agricultural and pastoral units. Their religion was a kind of Animism, the belief in good and bad spirits in everything that exists in nature, and in village deities who were mostly female, while the principal deities of the

Hindu religion are male. Gradually, over the centuries, the worship of the village deities and the Brāhmanic Hindu gods intermingled (Whitehead 1921).

Today, the worship of the indigenous village deities and the Brāhmanic Hindu gods such as Śiva and Viṣṇu, or Kṛṣṇa and Rāma (both incarnations of Viṣṇu) are practiced side by side in the villages of South India. Whitehead (1921) noted that whenever disaster or catastrophes in the form of famine or disease appeared, the villagers prayed to their deities for help and protection. Thus the religious life of the Dravidian peoples resembles a pre-Aryan form of worship with village deities that are related to everyday village life rather than Brāhmanic Hindu religious philosophy. In many ways it can be noted that the function of all the South Indian village goddesses is connected to the removal of recurring epidemics, though the village deities are also believed to be responsible for sicknesses and disasters. For example, Mariamma or Amman, the goddess connected to the disease of small pox, is known and feared for her bad temper and her anger which is believed to cause diseases and calamities. Yet she is worshipped in almost every village of Tamil Nadu in order to prevent these disasters or hardships or to get release from them (Amirthaligam 2005a, 2005b; Valk & Lourdusamy 2007). The female boundary goddess in many South Indian villages is *Kālī*, who functions as a protector of the village from evil spirits and demons and, in some villages, as the protector from cholera (Whitehead 1921).

The shrines of the guardian deities are commonly situated at the entrance of a village. At the core of a shrine there is usually a sacred tree, most often an indigenous species such as a bodhi (*Ficus religiosa*), a banyan (*F. benghalensis*), or a neem (*Azadirachta indica*). If the village guardian is male, an image made of stone or clay resides under the tree, sheltered by stone walls and a roof. A shrine dedicated to Ayyanaar almost always contains statues of terracotta horses painted in bright colours, with several smaller horses often placed to mark the path to the sacred tree. The horses are manufactured by the temple priest following strict ritual procedures. An Ayyanaar attendant priest belongs to the caste of Vishvakarma, 'the creator of the world' (Jarzombek 2009).

In this study the general objective has been to investigate the contemporary worship of trees among the Tamil people in the South Indian State of Tamil Nadu. The specific aims of the study are to examine and analyse the 1) religious and ecological roots behind the worship of sacred trees, and 2) the future of the veneration of trees in India in general.

Materials and methods

The data collection for this study took place during a field trip in December and January 2008/2009 to the state of Tamil Nadu which was chosen for its still widely practiced worship of sacred trees, a part of the rich cultural and religious heritage in the area. Basically every village has its own local deities that have their roots in Dravidian history, the time before the influence of the Aryan Brāhmanic religion. Compared to other geographical areas in India, the State of Tamil Nadu has a notably higher occurrence of banyan and bodhi trees, which are mostly chosen for worship. The area of data collection mainly comprises villages around the town of Kumbakonam in the Tanjore District (Map 1), a choice influenced by the fact that the sanctification of trees and groves is most alive



Map 1: Map of India showing Tamil Nadu. The white circle indicates the research area (Wikipedia).

in these places. Information was also gathered outside villages in forests and open spaces, wherever temples and shrines of sacred trees could be found. The villages where most of the material was collected were Uttappallam, Veerecholapuram, Pondhazhai, Sivapuram and Swamimalai.

In this study, participant observation was the method chosen to collect the data. Observations focused on the daily routines of local people in connection with religious practices. The main mode of collecting primary data was through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions presented both in individual and group interviews taking place with the help of an interpreter. All in all 16 group interviews (men and women) and six individual interviews were conducted, all held close to temples, sacred shrines or sacred trees and groves. The choice of group interviews was based on the assumption that the desired information is common knowledge among the local people. The criterion for selection of interviewees was the existence of their connection to sacred trees and/or shrines dedicated to local deities. Primary literature such as the Vedas, the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Dharma Śāstra etc. were studied beforehand and after the field work was completed. The study of this literature was of great help in placing contemporary religious practices into their historical context.

Results

Sacred trees and village deities

The first observation made at the onset of the field work was the continuing vitality of the sacred tree cult in the daily life of the villagers in the research area. The worship of sacred trees is by no means something that lies in the historical past but is present everywhere today. Very typical of the villages is a shrine found under a large tree, dedicated to one of the protective local deities and placed at each entrance to the village, while a huge bodhi or neem tree generally serves as a shady place in the centre of the village under which locals

gather to chat and relax. Furthermore, there is at least one shrine dedicated to a village deity of the pre-Brahmānic period and/or a temple for devotees of the contemporary Hindu (Brahmānic) gods such as Śiva, Gaṇeśa or Hanumān, among others.

According to the interviewees, there is a particular pattern that gives a tree the status of sanctity. First, a deity that has chosen a certain tree as his/her residence contacts a villager (male or female), who is generally known for his/her purity and spiritual sensitivity. The contacted villager thus becomes an intermediary who spreads the message to other villagers. Most commonly the person who is contacted by a deity belongs to a family line that has traditionally chosen sacred trees and named the deity that will take residence there and guard the village life. However, this is not always the case and occasionally anyone might become the medium between the deity and the people. Later he or she acts as the first ritual specialist to perform the rites and procedures meant to honour the deity's new residence. As a visible sign, a small shrine with the image of the god or goddess, is placed at the foot of the tree which then remains the focus of attention for devotees who regularly gather for *pūjās* (religious ceremonies). Others just stop by for a moment of prayer when passing. However, should the deity collect a large crowd of devotees, the villagers may build the deity a temple made of concrete or other materials such as stone, clay or wood, whereupon the image of the resident god or goddess is then placed inside the temple and becomes the focus of attention for the devotees as a personification of the deity inhabiting the tree. The narrative connected to the history of a sacred tree and the founding of the shrine or temple is repeated over generations among the villagers. In the process of succession, old trees or patches of forests degrade naturally and the new growth inherits their sanctity: the older a sacred tree or grove, the stronger the accumulation of prayers and rites, even if the original trees have been naturally replaced by new growth several times. With the age the sanctity increases correspondingly.

Idols of different forms of the deity are usually placed at the foot of the trunk. The most auspicious days for *pūjās* are Tuesdays and Fridays and are frequently attended by the villagers. The audience of the *pūjā* is commonly rather small—from a couple to a few dozen people. Once a year, every village organises a great feast for its main god/goddess at the major village temple in which the majority of the villagers participate, along with former villagers who have left for cities and other areas who return for this annual celebration. The ceremonies and rites follow a strict pattern of ritual worship that has been handed over from earlier generations: rites in major Hindu temples generally follow a Sanskrit-Brahmānic formula, while in Tamil villages local customs and prayers prevail. At the religious ceremony, devotees place their offerings at the foot of the tree either as thanksgiving or to ask for favours from the deity. *Pūjās* often include a ritual called *āratī* where a sacred fire is distributed among the devotees by the *pūjārī* (temple priest). It is common that the space around a village temple is kept free of fields or buildings and planted with a range of trees that are classified as sacred. Thus those temples become shady places where devotees come for prayers and relaxation.

The most common temples/shrines found and visited during the field trip were dedicated to three particular deities: the female goddess Amman and the warrior deities Muneeswaran and Ayyanaar. Mariamman, or simply Amman, is the main mother goddess in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu, associated with the Hindu deities Durgā and Pārvatī and also the fierce goddess Kālī who can take the form of Durgā. Generally Amman is

worshipped as a goddess of fertility and auspiciousness. Depending on location and local folklore she appears in several different forms. The goddesses are usually escorted by their male consorts whose images display blazing eyes and huge moustaches. In their role as warriors and protectors they carry a long and sharp sword in one hand and a skull in the other.

The two main male deities most present in the research area were Muneeswaran and Ayyanaar. Muneeswaran is a Hindu god, considered to be a form of Śiva, who is worshipped as a family deity in Tamil Nadu. In many of the shrines dedicated to him he is portrayed as a fierce god and women usually do not attend such places without male accompaniment. His spirit is often experienced as evil and mischievous and to find favour with him the villagers offer him blood sacrifices in form of chicken or lamb and alcohol. During the data collection, three chickens were tied to the branch of a sacred karuvel tree (*Acacia arabica*), beneath a shrine of Muneeswaran, waiting to be sacrificed to the deity during the next *pūjā*. Ayyanaar, a local Tamil deity, is perceived as the watchman of a village, patrolling it nightly on horseback, and devotees offer him terracotta horses in worship. He is regarded by the villagers as having a benevolent and good character and does not accept blood sacrifice of animals, preferring to be worshipped with the ritual fire *ārati* and accepting offerings in the form of flowers, coconuts and fruit (Amirthalingam 2005a, 2005b).

Although planted in honour of the village deities, interviewees mentioned the reluctance of farmers to plant bodhi or banyan trees close to their farmlands because of the large quantity of water and nutrients they require, and the tendency their strong root systems have of tapping into water sources which are meant to serve crop cultivation. Furthermore, they usually grow to huge proportions and start shading the crops while farmers, although owners of the land and legally also of the trees on their land, are not supposed to hurt them in any way. Even cutting branches from a sacred tree is seen as a sacrilege likely to result in damaging repercussions from its resident. In the village of Swamimalai the *pūjārī* of the Muneeswaran temple, situated under a huge bodhi tree, told the following story:

The tree where Muneeswaran has his abode started shading the farmer's fields that you see here right behind the temple compound. He informed the village committee that he was going to cut some of the branches to reduce the shade. Everyone in the village protested against his plans because of the fear of consequences provoked by Muneeswaran's anger. The farmer did not listen to anyone and cut some branches before the onset of the last monsoon season. Today, only one year later, he is bound to bed with a bad disease and doctors believe that his death is approaching. Everyone in the village is convinced that Muneeswaran has punished him and sent him the deadly disease.

Veneration of trees

One of the most outstanding appearances to the human eye in Indian nature is the banyan tree. Almost every banyan tree seen during fieldwork was marked as a place of worship. Usually vermilion signs on the trunk, incense sticks or images of deities, made of clay or wood and placed at the foot of the tree, mark the tree as the abode of a particular deity. Huge-sized banyan trees with considerable age are often places of pilgrimage. This raises



Figure 1. Sacred banyan tree outside the village of Sivapuram (Photo: Kurt Walter).

the issue of the difference among sacred trees. There were those rather inconspicuous trees, where people just stopped for a prayer and rest under the shade, and those that retained the service of a *pūjārī* performing the ceremonial rituals.

A place with sacred trees of extreme beauty was found outside the village of Sivapuram (Figure 1). The tree was of considerable size and the interviewees reported its age to be almost two hundred years. The story about the history of the place was told by the temple guide and reaffirmed by the surrounding crowd:

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, about 150 years ago, two girls, sisters, of the village Sivapuram, died of small pox and were buried beneath a young banyan tree. People started visiting the grave to pay their respects. According to the narrative, a barren woman prayed in front of the grave to the banyan tree and asked for the blessing of bearing children. When she got pregnant and delivered her first child, she and her husband started to worship the tree on a regular basis. They were convinced that through the grace of the two buried girls that reside as good spirits in the tree, the devotee received the gift of fertility. The story spread very quickly among the villagers and to other, more remote places. Soon a temple was built under the tree. Today, the branches of the huge tree are decorated with silk garments in shining colours. They are the gifts from devotees who came to thank the deity for whatever wishes were fulfilled. Others place miniature cradles on the branches in hope that they might be granted offspring. Weekly *pūjās* take place on Tuesdays and Fridays. Annually there is a huge celebration where people arrive from near and far to pray to the spirits of the sisters. It is told that this place is particularly attracting women who pray for offspring or give thanks for being granted children.



Figure 2. Marriage between a bodhi tree (left) and a neem tree (Photo: Kurt Walter).

Tree marriages

Tree marriage is an ancient rite that is still practiced in India today, particularly among the Tamil people. Female and male trees are united with each other in wedding ceremonies. Another form of tree marriage is the union between a human and a tree. The wedding of two trees is still very common in the villages of the research area. The most esteemed union is the one between the female neem tree and the male bodhi tree (Figure 2). The seedlings are planted beside each other and tied together with a *thaali*, a sacred yellow thread. The interviewees in the area explained that it was common that the wedding of trees happened at the same day a human couple celebrated their marriage. After the couple has united the trees, the groom ties another *thaali* around his bride's neck.

It is believed that while uniting trees during wedding, the virtues of the plant are transferred into the daily life of the couple. During the field investigation the author came across a bodhi tree and remnants of a neem tree that twisted around the bodhi tree. Several small black stone images made of clay, depicting a cobra snake and dedicated to Lord Śiva were placed at the foot of the trunk (Figure 3). The caretaker of the small shrine, living opposite the trees, came to narrate the history of the tree couple.

In the summer of 1953, he planted the bodhi tree opposite his house, long before the street was built. He had seen that bodhi trees used to be planted together with neem trees in many places, and people told him to do so as well, to please god. He did as advised and planted a neem tree right beside the bodhi tree. When his parents chose him a wife, he was advised by the elders of the village and relatives to perform the tree marriage ritual before his own marriage, as had been the custom in his region, in the belief that it would grant him an auspicious family life and many children. So he organised the *puja*, tied a



Figure 3. Tree shrine with snake images placed in front of the trunk (Photo: Kurt Walter).

yellow *thaali* around the trees and ritually performed the wedding between them. The same day the whole village was invited to celebrate at his expense.

A short while later he himself got married and in due time his wife delivered their first and only son. The couple spent ten happy years together. Then his wife suddenly became ill. At the same time, the neem tree started to dry out and it finally died, as did his wife. The man thinks that his married life was directly connected with the life of those trees and he did not marry again because, whenever he looks out of his house to the trees opposite, he feels that he is still connected to his wife, the way the neem tree, although now dry, is connected to the bodhi tree.

The interviewees mentioned other variations of marriages between trees and humans. Before the marriage of a couple is fixed, usually with a spouse chosen by their parents, the last hurdle to be accomplished is the statement of a competent astrologer. Should the astrology chart show any unfortunate happening in the life of the couple during their marriage there are two ways to solve the problem: one is to cancel the wedding and look for a more suitable partner; a second solution is the marriage of the partner who is predicted to cause the misfortune to a tree. After the tree marriage, the trunk of the plant is cut to symbolize the end of the first marriage. Now the bride/groom is ready to enter her/his second marriage with the human partner. In this way the foretold omen of misfortune can be avoided. Usually both celebrations happen on the same day. Another reason for marrying trees may be barrenness in the wife. By first marrying a tree, the ability of trees to produce plenty of fruit is believed to be transferred into the woman through the bond of marriage. It is also assumed that trees have an enormous capacity to absorb suffering and are capable of transferring auspiciousness and strength into human life.

Trees for auspiciousness

To the local people trees in general are associated with good fortune, serving people in many ways: as a source of fuel, food and building materials and to control erosion. Trees also serve as shade which is important in a climate where the temperatures climb to more than 40 °C during summer. The tree that is considered most sacred among Hindus and Buddhists in India is the pipal tree (*aśvattha* in Sanskrit), also known as the bodhi tree. Pipal trees usually reach a huge size and are regarded as marvellous shade trees. Most temples and shrines for local deities in Tamil Nadu and the Brāhmanic Gods nationwide are established close to these holy fig trees. People told me that by worshipping a bodhi tree one would be released of all one's sins to lead a happy and auspicious life. It is believed that the Buddha achieved enlightenment under the bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya in the north Indian State of Bihar. It is associated with Vishnu in particular, but it is commonly assumed that all the gods reside in the tree (Haberman 2013).

Trees are also an important source for medicines. The science of *ayurveda*, a part of the Atharva Veda (the fourth Veda), deals with herbs and trees as raw materials in the manufacture of medicines for the cure of diseases. The neem tree in particular is most respected for its healing qualities and almost every part of the tree including its sap is used for curative purposes. The villagers said that they use neem oil to cure acne, scabies, eczema, psoriasis, warts, boils, syphilitic sores, ringworm and other skin diseases, as well as small pox. They also said that during the time of the British rule, the people were asked to place a leaf of neem outside their houses as a sign of small pox infection in the family. Thus, in order to be left in peace from British officials, neem leaves were placed in front of many houses without any occurrence of small pox. Neem leaves are also widely used by non-vegetarian field workers to protect them from evil spirits during their lunch. As they spend long days away from home, for example planting teak tree seedlings, they take their meals with them. It is believed that the smell of meat attracts bloodthirsty demons. But if one places neem leaves around the lunch-box, they create a protective aura that keeps demons away. There is still another purpose for neem leaves, which was demonstrated by a village elder in Uttappallam. He showed how natural healers drive out evil spirits from mentally sick people, using a bundle of neem twigs to beat the back of a young boy who had volunteered to act as a model. However, it was mentioned that nowadays this form of treatment was practiced rather seldom.

High in the hierarchy of the most sacred trees in India is also the banyan tree, *vāṭa* in the Sanskrit language. It is capable of reaching a magnificent height, with a huge trunk and very similar leaf shape as the bodhi tree. Upon reaching mature age, the banyan tree is of immense beauty to the human eye, with a rather exceptional growth pattern. From its wide-spreading branches it sends down aerial roots that attach to the ground, thus growing new roots and later forming new trunks. A cluster of an old banyan tree has been measured to cover a ground area of 1,500–2,000 feet in circumference (Simoons 1998). Such trees, together with the holy River Ganges, are often portrayed as the image of India and described as marvels of nature that exemplify the beauty of all vegetation (Ragozin 1902). All three Gods of the Hindu triad—Brahma (embodied in the roots), Vishnu (personified in the bark) and Shiva (symbolized in the branches)—are associated with the banyan tree and Hindus believe that making a pilgrimage to any of the famous

sacred banyan trees is equal to 12 years of sacrifice (Gandhi & Singh 1994). With age and a long history of devotion sacred power is believed to accumulate in a tree and all the visible signs of devotion such as vermilion colour on the trunk and votive statues, miniature cradles or silk garments seem to attract yet more pilgrims as the example from Sivapuram shows.

Discussion

The roots of tree veneration

India has a long tradition of venerating and protecting trees and forests. For Hindus, nature as a whole, including the atmosphere, humans, plants and animals, is a part of God's body and thus divine. In other words, God and nature comprise an inseparable unity. The cosmic law of *dharmā* demands that each Hindu works and cares for the good of nature and humanity (Dwivedi 2000). When people were asked during the interviews how they had received the education that formed their attitudes about the sanctity of nature they usually answered that this knowledge had been transferred within the family.

Cultural codes as well as moral and ethical values have also been transmitted across the generations both orally and in written form in the Vedas, which were the first scripts, composed and handed forward by the Aryans nearly four thousand years ago. The Vedas glorified nature in hymns created to persuade the gods—basically personifications of forces such as wind, fire or rain—to look upon them kindly. The herders, who were the majority of the peoples of the Vedic time, depended entirely on the powers and moods of nature and, through sacrifices and prayers, they hoped to control the untamed forces of nature (Lippner 1994). Another classical Indian text that deals with nature and the environment is the Arthaśāstras, composed by Kautilya during the times of the great kingdoms from 500 BC–AD 300 (McGee 2000). The scriptures were meant to guide responsible state leaders in maintaining and protecting both natural resources and the well-being of people. Persons responsible for the sustainable use of forest products were expected to have a profound knowledge of botany and numerous plants and trees are listed and classified in the Arthaśāstras, particularly for their use as medical remedies (Shamasastri 1915).

There are two remarkable events in the recent past that underline the deep respect felt towards nature in the Hindu culture: one was the tragedy connected with the Bishnoi community; the other, only a few decades ago, the struggle of the Chipko Andolan Movement. The Bishnois consist of small communities mainly in the drylands of Rajasthan and the neighbouring states of Gujarat, Harayana and Punjab. As a branch of Hinduism, the religion of the Bishnois was founded in 1451 AD by Guru Maharaj Jambaji in the Marwar drylands, a part of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan. The name Bishnois means the 'Twentyniners' in reference to the 29 principles Guru Maharaj Jambaji established for the community, most of which are directly connected to environmental protection. For instance, the people of the community were forbidden to cut any living trees; the killing of animals was prohibited; and people were encouraged to control the grazing of their livestock. As a consequence the advancing desertification of the land stopped and the *khejri* trees (*P. cineraria*) gradually formed dense patches of forest.

In 1730, the king of Jodhpur, Maharaja Ajit Singh, was in great need of timber in order to build his new palace. The Bishnoi village of Khejadali, situated 30 km from Jodhpur, was to provide the timber for the project. Soldiers were sent to cut trees despite massive protests of the community. Amrita Devi and her three daughters went to protect trees by hugging them. As the cutting went on, the family sacrificed their lives to save the trees. This did not stop the soldiers from continuing their mission. Inspired by Amrita, the community decided that for each fallen tree a member of the community would sacrifice his or her life. 363 members of the Bishnois had already given their lives before the Maharaja heard what was going on in Khejadali. He immediately withdrew his soldiers, apologized for the disaster and, in compensation, issued a royal decree that forbade cutting green trees or killing any animals within the boundaries of the Bishnoi community. The decree is still valid and these areas are now islands of greenery surrounded by the Thar Desert. The *khejri* tree, which is the most sacred tree to the Bishnois and also the most valued tree economically, now covers large tracts of the area. Due to the protection of animals, the communities today are able to enjoy the sights of the wild black buck (*Antelope cervicapra*) and chinkara (*Gazella bennettii*), both animals that were almost wiped out a few decades ago and only survive in a few small protected reserves (Sankhala & Jackson 1985; Gadgil 1987; Dwivedi 1990).

An event that gained attention outside the borders of India was perpetrated by the Chipko Andolan Movement (literally: movement to embrace) and took place in Uttarakhand, a northern state of India that has a common border with Nepal and Tibet. The rivers Ganges and Yamuna, both sacred to the Hindus, flow through the valleys of the area and are vital sources of water supply for the people living there. Continuous deforestation caused the floods of the Alakanda River in 1970, which left behind the loss of hundreds of people and a devastated landscape (Bhatt 1990). The birth of the Chipko Movement took place in 1973, three years later. It all started when the government granted permission to the Enterprise Symonds Co., which produces sport articles, to extract ash trees (*Fraxinus* spp.) from the forest of Mandal, near the city of Gopeshwar. A village committee led by Chandi Prasad Bhatt protested the action by hugging the trees which the contractors came to fell. The protest was successful and the government of India cancelled the permit that allowed the company to log the forest (Guha 1989).

The Bishnoi community based the preservation of their environment on the religious principles laid down by Guru Maharaj Jambaji. Chaudhury (2006) suggests that Guru Maharaj Jambaji had foreseen the negative consequences of uncontrolled extraction of the scarce natural resources of the dryland ecosystem and connected prudent environmental practices with religious sanctity. The protest of the Chipko Movement was based rather on ecological principles and a growing awareness of the importance of forests in the protection of watershed areas from soil erosion (Guha 1989). The driving force of both movements was, therefore, not connected to economic profit but, rather, the prudent usage of natural resources. Both conflicts have demonstrated the sincerity and readiness of people to fight for their environment, on religious and ecological grounds. The same principles are observed by the Tamil people when honouring and caring for their sacred environment.

Sacred groves

In almost every village in Tamil Nadu there is a sacred grove dedicated to a local folk deity. Sacred groves are patches of forests that range from a few trees up to hundreds of hectares that consist of traditionally preserved, almost virgin forests maintained through indigenous cultural and religious rituals practiced by the members of community. They are often islands of biodiversity. Many of the species found in sacred groves are rare, endemic and endangered, often possessing medicinal properties (Anthwal et al. 2006; Bhakat & Sen 2008). It is believed that, in the past, sacred groves were protected and managed because of religious sentiments (Waghchaure et al. 2006). Today they offer refuge to rare plant and animal species and play a vital role in the conservation and preservation of biodiversity. On the other hand, ecological consideration might have played an important role in the establishment of these protected patches of forests. Many sacred groves are located near important water resources which supply the villagers with their daily water. They also protect the ground from soil erosion (Anthwal et al. 2006).

The bodhi and other fig trees are considered keystone species and are essential for many birds when other fruits and flowers are scarcely available. Beside birds (doves, in particular), squirrels, bats and monkeys feeding on figs become agents of dispersal of the seeds of the trees (Colding & Folke 2001). The total protection of the bodhi trees in India, even without being associated to any deity, suggests that the sanctification of these and other trees might have developed traditions that are linked with conserving biological resources that are important for the communities (Gadgil 1987). It is also argued that the reason and motives why people respect the taboo connected to sacred groves rather than exploiting them are of religious nature: people are afraid of vengeful gods and deities and fear their reprisals when violating the rule of leaving those patches of nature untouched (Kent 2009).

However, there is an ongoing battle over natural resources caused by a continuously expanding population in India. Meanwhile the structure and composition of society is changing, religious values are loosening among Hindus and one of the reasons noted for the reduction in the number of sacred groves is the decline of traditional values and religious beliefs among the younger generation (Tomalin 2004; Khumbongmayum et al. 2005). One of the interviews held during data collection in 2009 supports the view that the belief that deities have their abode in certain trees and sacred groves is often interpreted as superstition (Tiwari et al. 1998):

Shiva, 40 years of age, recounted his opinion about the veneration of trees. When he lived in the village as a young boy, he joined his parents for the *pūjās* at various local temples and sacred trees. After he completed his studies away from home, he started to think that all worship of deities in trees was nothing but superstition. He said that he recognized the value of trees in providing necessary raw material for building, firewood and protection against soil erosion, but he did not see any sanctity in them. When he returns to the village to visit his parents he still joins them for the *pūjās* because he does not want to upset them. The annual celebration of the local deity, in particular, is an occasion where all the family members meet and celebrate together. He himself no longer has the feeling that there is a deity present in the tree, but he would not let his parents know his thoughts (personal communication).

Shiva's position is in line with an increasing trend in the contemporary middle-aged generation that has migrated into larger towns for study or work in which common religious sentiments have been gradually replaced by rational ideas. Trees are no longer respected and worshipped for the sake of a deity that has his/her abode in the tree and protects people from evil but rather for their utility. This tendency seems to be closely connected to the increasing urbanisation of rural areas: as people of different cultural and religious backgrounds intermingle, it causes a decrement in traditional values (Ormsby & Bhagwat 2010).

Several activities responsible for the degradation or disappearance of sacred sites are mentioned in the literature: mining and stone quarrying, encroachment that aims at setting up industries nearby, the rearing of livestock in sacred groves, the felling of valuable timber in privately owned sacred sites, forest clearance for immigrant settlements or increasing crop plantation in sacred groves by neighbouring landowners (Ormsby & Bhagwat 2010; Bhagwat & Rutte 2006). There is also an increasing threat posed by the collection of biomass from sacred groves which has become a regular practice (Ormsby & Bhagwat 2010; Ormsby 2011). Jayarajan (2004) reports that 124 sacred groves of North Malabar are subjected to biomass removal and its removal, particularly as fuel wood and for cattle grazing, is reported to threaten groves all over India (Malhotra et al. 2001; Khan et al. 2008; Anthwal et al. 2010). People do encroach on forests, even sacred groves, if they do not have any alternative resource base. Only those forest patches which are far from villages or difficult to access have been spared and conserved. On the other hand, when there are other tree resources available, sacred groves are left untouched (Kalam 1996).

Although the *brāhmanic* gods of the Hindu religion are present in all South Indian villages, there is still a higher number of sacred groves in contemporary rural Tamil Nadu where the traditional worship of trees and forests according to ancient Dravidian tradition has been maintained to a greater degree than in other parts of India (Whitehead 1921). The sanctification of sacred trees and the custom of tree marriages are still common practice. As reported in the news, in 2009 there was a celebration involving hundreds of participants where a neem and bodhi tree were married after growing side by side for 35 years. The wedding ceremony represented an appeal by the locals to the tree deities to stop the long-lasting drought period that had prevailed in the area (ANI 2009).

The role of sacred groves for environmental conservation

In this study I have evaluated the phenomenon of sacred trees and groves in India. Its tradition dates back to distant history, to even before the Aryans entered the northern terrain of the continent. Following this long tradition, certain trees and groves have been pronounced sacred and protected from practices of consumption and management. This study illuminates contemporary practices and rites connected to sacred trees and groves such as, for instance, different forms of tree marriages before turning to the role of sacred groves as a safe haven for biodiversity and environmental protection. I have also discussed the causes for the degradation and often disappearance of sacred groves in India. The final discussion point deals with the recent critique of the efficacy of sacred groves in terms of environmental conservation.

The concept of sacred forests as a means to control and conserve natural resources through spiritual doctrines has gained a lot of attention among Western scientists during recent decades, often being used uncritically and normatively by community and environmental activists to express opinions that vary between two extremes. Many environmentalists argue that these fragile ecosystems should be free from all human activity while others believe that management practices and a prudent extraction of certain goods do not necessarily conflict with conservation aims. Dove et al (2011), show that in many sacred groves in Southeast Asia several commodities may be extracted by the community. If the situation demands, people are permitted to gather fuel for cooking, to hunt and even to extract timber for the construction of houses. Some environmentalists argue that forests are only worth conserving if they are free of any economic exploitation either past or present. However, following the discussion of Dove et al. (2011), it can be claimed that many sacred groves are the results of a historical process of environmental degradation (e.g. deforestation), and merely represent the remains of a landscape transformed by earlier generations. In India, for example, deforestation was caused on a wide scale by the British Colonialists and sacred groves are, therefore, often patches of forests that are only the remnants of a larger forest, destroyed in the past. Furthermore, Dove et al. (2011) discuss the often controversial viewpoint concerning the role of sacred groves in terms of environmental conservation: in the early twentieth century, environmental degradation was blamed on the uncontrolled depletion of natural resources by local communities, for example, while, decades later, many observers held consumption pressure and economic growth at a national and even global level responsible for the depletion of local natural resources.

To many observers the desired stage of a well-functioning, protected ecosystem is a state of harmony and equilibrium without human interference. Sacred groves have therefore served as examples of such an environment, one in which changes are prevented by religion. Towards the end of the twentieth century, scientists such as Cronon (1996) strongly criticized the notion that for nature to be pristine and worth protecting it needs to be static, and remote from human interference and human history. He argues that if wilderness cannot provide a place in which human beings may live and act, then there is no solution to environmental problems that we confront now and in the future. He concludes that one can only conserve an environment if it is fully integrated into society. Sheridan (2008: 74), studying African sacred groves in Tanzania, argues that they are far from being static relics; rather, they are sites where ‘...ecological, social, political, and cultural dynamics intersect and disconnect over time’. He adds that conservation policies should not only aim at empowering locals to protect and maintain sacred groves but should be oriented toward adaptive co-management at various levels (local, national and global) by different responsible institutions.

Sacred groves are not primarily protected in order to benefit the local community’s livelihood support, like common-pool resources (community forests, grazing lands, fish ponds etc.). However, they often play a vital role in protecting and securing important commodities such as, for instance, watershed areas that deliver life-saving water to the whole community. Therefore Rutte (2011) suggests that the protection and possible management of sacred groves should be given into the hands of a community committee, such as the *panchayats* (democratically elected Village Administrations) in India, who may

decide about the protection of these forests in accordance with spiritual and ecological values. There are three possible potential conflicts facing the future integrity of sacred natural sites. Among resource users, these conflicts might appear ‘...between spiritual and economic values, between spiritual and ecological values and during the process of detaching spiritual values from nature’ (ibid.: 2392). No blue print exists for a single right way to maintain and protect the common natural resources of sacred groves. Scientists working in this field, however, suggest that it will be important to develop strategies that strengthen the rights and involvement of local communities in order to manage sacred natural sites adequately (ibid.).

Conclusions

Despite the technological boom and modern scientific developments around the world the worship of sacred trees is still a phenomenon in contemporary South India where sacred trees and the deities connected to them (*vrikṣa devatā*) are sources of social cohesion, still bringing family members together to celebrate an important annual feast devoted to the local village deities. In the south of the sub-continent, past and present are still interconnected and the material world is linked to symbolic values. There is no strict distinction between religious and ecological roots that provide the basis for the worship of trees and the protection of sacred groves. The sacred character of groves and trees is both a product of history but also part of an ongoing process of social change in society. What has caught the attention of decision makers and scientists is the high conservation value connected to the use of religious and spiritual doctrines in the protection of continues degrading natural resources. Tamil people are obviously afraid of the punishment of gods if they harm a sacred tree while they also strongly believe in the power that nature has accumulated in those trees. By worshipping trees they hope that auspiciousness and fertility will be transferred into their lives.

Sacred trees and groves are often islands of biodiversity in a degrading landscape, situated in or close to important watershed areas that deliver essential water resources to the local communities. Several plant and animal species have been saved from extinction due to these sacred places, while many rare and endangered plants are yet to be studied for their curative properties. In the long run they might become an economic resource for the village communities that would enable them to diversify sources of income through their prudent extraction.

The current Forest Policy in India focuses on shifting the responsibility for traditionally nurtured forests (particular sacred groves) to the villages that are led by the *panchayats*. The villagers are given usufruct rights to non-timber forest products such as fruits or mushrooms in order to oversee the prudent exploitation of their forests. Most of the sacred groves meanwhile belong to the Indian Government although there are still a huge number that should be transferred into the care of the Forest Department. Private owners still trade the timber of their forests for economic gains, but in the hands of the Government they would be passed on to surrounding communities that could care for them in traditional ways.

Another threat sacred groves are facing in India today is posed by the degeneration and weakening of religious values among the younger generations. Often economic values overrule considerations of ecological prudence and the ancient practice of protecting sacred groves is no longer self-evident in the future, and even today many of these sacred spots have deteriorated to various degrees over the course of time. An ever increasing population pressure combined with a shortage of natural resources will put greater pressure on them in the future though, up until now, religious values have played an important role in India, and it is still mostly the sacred that prevails over the profane.

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