

2016

Tree Worship: Accidental Conservation of Biodiversity through the Protection of Biodivinity

Emily Grabauskas
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion>



Part of the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Grabauskas, Emily (2016) "Tree Worship: Accidental Conservation of Biodiversity through the Protection of Biodivinity," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 15 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol15/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Denison Journal of Religion by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Tree Worship: Accidental Conservation of Biodiversity through the Protection of Biodivinity

Emily Grabauskas

The worship of trees is a well-known practice among Hindus in India. It is said that through worship of a particular tree, one is able to connect with the universality of all deities. In performing sacred worship rituals, a tree is cared for and loved, but the question to examine is whether this love is meant for the tree itself or solely for the deity that is said to own or inhabit the tree. This essay will focus on whether tree worship leads to a conscious protection of biodiversity and in turn, to environmentalism; or whether the protection of biodiversity is purely by chance and therefore accidental. In addition, if the protection of the trees is intended to serve the needs of the gods, one should also examine whether the trees are receiving proper care. Although it is a Hindu belief that sacred trees and groves should be preserved and kept alive, the direct intentions of the Hindu devotees is not to protect the lives of the trees, but instead to protect the divinity that is found inside of the trees and sacred groves. Consequently, proper treatment of nature is not always the result of tree worship.

In order to examine the questions presented concerning tree worship, it is necessary to look at specific examples. In *People Trees*, David Haberman fully describes one instance of tree worship, worship of Pipal trees.¹ Although the ceremony described is a special one, Pipal trees are worshiped everyday in this way for the welfare, happiness, health, or prosperity of oneself and others. However, this specific ritual takes place on Somvati Amavasya, the day the new moon happens to fall on a Monday, and the women of the village perform the ritual. The ritual begins with a water offering followed by incense placed at the base of the tree along with garlands of flowers and other gifts. The women then proceed to offer rice, apply *sindur* paste to the trunk, and wrap the trunk of the tree in orange and red string signifying the establishment of a protective relationship. Finally, the women circumambulate the tree 108 times, embrace it, and kiss it.² The process of tree worship may seem primitive to those not familiar with the Hindu religion, as it seems as if people are practicing pagan nature worship, but this is not the case. Tree worship, in this case, is a display of animism: the belief that spirits are present in nonhuman life forms.³ In India, it is believed that trees are “the abodes

1 David L. Haberman, *People Trees* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 60.

2 *Ibid.*, 60-61.

3 *Ibid.*, 7.

or embodied forms of divinities.”⁴ For example, in the sacred pipal tree, “Brahma resides in the roots . . . Vishnu in the trunk, Mahadeva (Shiva) in the branches, and all the gods on each and every leaf.”⁵ It is through the worship of sacred trees that Hindus are able to connect and perform *darshan*, the practice of seeing and being seen by the deity during worship.⁶

Not only do deities inhabit trees, but also sacred groves, a belief articulated by Eliza Kent. As Kent describes: “The groves are sites where gods reside; thus they are temples.”⁷ The process of tree worship as described above can be mistaken for pagan nature worship; however, the reasoning behind Hindu tree worship goes much deeper as it is embedded in religious practice. Hindus articulate that they “do this to honor god. This is a part of our Hindu religion. We worship the pipal tree as god.”⁸ The worship of trees in India is not to intentionally give love to the tree, but instead to the deity that inhabits the tree. There are many steps taken to facilitate *darshan* with the god, and since this involves being seen by and seeing the deity, it is therefore common that the tree is made to be more human-like. This practice is known as anthropomorphism.

Anthropomorphism can be defined as “an application of what is familiar to what is unfamiliar.”⁹ In other words, the practice of anthropomorphism leads people to assign human-like characteristics to nonhuman things. In India, this is done in order to facilitate tree worship. The most common practice that demonstrates the belief that “this tree is a person just like you and me” is the placing of a face-mask on the trunk of the tree.¹⁰ Haberman explains this process, saying that “the placing of a face on a neem tree might best be seen as an intentional and effective strategy to connect with a nonhuman species.”¹¹ If this practice was not observed, it would be much more difficult for Hindus to connect with the divinity inside of the sacred trees, and so a facemask is “placed in the tree so that the worshiper who visits the temple has a view of the face.”¹² It is extremely important for *darshan* that the face has eyes, as this allows for the tree to see and be seen.¹³ Through this process, the devotee is able to create a deeper connection with the tree given that he or she will have placed a particular worth on it, a worth comparable to that which is inherent in humans. This practice of anthropomorphism is one that has

4 Ibid., 33.

5 Ibid., 64.

6 Haberman, *People Trees*, 63.

7 Eliza F. Kent, *Sacred Groves and Local Gods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 39.

8 Haberman, *People Trees*, 63.

9 Ibid., 21.

10 Ibid., 4.

11 Ibid., 154.

12 Ibid., 143.

13 Ibid., 147.

the potential to protect trees and/or harm the trees and sacred groves in which worship takes place.

According to Eliza Kent, tree and grove worship inevitably leads to “accidental environmentalism” and anthropomorphism seems to allow for this even more. Tree worship, unknowingly to many, takes place all over the world. In parts of Europe, there were once extreme penalties imposed for even the slightest damage to a tree. According to old German law, in the event that one peeled the bark off of a tree, the consequence was that his or her naval was to be cut out and nailed to the damaged part of the tree as replacement bark.¹⁴ Furthermore, once the remainder of the torture was complete, the man or woman was left dead. Haberman offers the following as an explanation for this particular choice of punishment: “The intention of the punishment was to replace the dead bark by a living substitute taken from the culprit; it was a life for a life, the life of a man for the life of a tree.”¹⁵ Haberman notes that in pre-Christian Europe, this action was significant because they believed in animism. In places such as Austria, for example, many believed that the trees needed to be protected because they were “animate beings with feelings and consciousness.”¹⁶ As of recently in Thailand, the use of anthropomorphism allows for the protection of trees. Trees are “saved from the chainsaw in Thailand by ordaining them as monks and wrapping them in saffron robes.”¹⁷ In both of these instances, though thousands of years apart and appearing on different continents, the worshipers seem to be acting in accordance with environmentalism. However, upon further review, it is apparent that the protection of the trees and groves is not offered for nature itself but for the divine beings that inhabit it.

As I researched this topic, I was left with one unanswered question: has anyone ever specifically asked a Hindu whether he or she consciously protects the trees for environmental purposes? I elected to interview a family friend who is a Sikh city dweller in India. This offered the perfect opportunity to pose my question directly to someone familiar with Hinduism. She is not from a part of India that takes part in tree worship, so she was not able to provide me with a firsthand account of tree worshipping; however, she was able share information she has learned from other Hindus. After beginning my interview by mentioning my topic of tree worship, she indicated that customs such as tree worship “are for guaranteeing longevity, good health, eternal life, and protection in present life.” This is a

14 Ibid., 35.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 37.

basis for the personal gains one receives through worshiping the divine in trees. I further narrowed my topic during the interview in order to find out whether it was appropriate to call Hindus “accidental environmentalists” or if their intent was to actually protect the trees and sacred groves. Through her upbringing, she learned that “so much is blind faith and reverence for fear of life.” She believes that “the blind faith is a whole lot of blindness. Not cutting them (the trees) down is for fear of upsetting the gods and the fear of the unknown that gets invited therefore.” It is through these statements that she confirmed Eliza Kent’s claim that the environmental consciousness of Hindus is purely coincidental. While she is not a practicing tree worshiper and so her insight is limited to the knowledge she has obtained from others, she did claim that “there isn’t one ounce of thought regarding the environment. It is all steeped in tradition and faith.” Thus, from her perspective, the purpose of tree worship to devout Hindus is the protection of and devotion to the many deities that inhabit the trees and the forests, not to protect the environment itself.

While in Banaras, Haberman noted that there were numerous signs posted around trees. These signs read, “God resides in this tree.”¹⁸ If God did not inhabit trees and sacred groves, there is no reason to believe that environmental protection would be of importance to Hindu devotees. This point directly relates to the second tier of my question: the trees, according to Hindu devotees, are not worthy of worship unless they are viewed as more human-like. The belief that trees and groves should be preserved stems from man’s animistic theory of nature, the belief that spirits are present in nonhuman life forms. If one were to remove the belief of animism, it would be “possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.”¹⁹ In fact, Haberman points out that some argue “that much of the ecological crisis is due to the destruction of animistic worldviews.”²⁰ However, the belief that trees and groves are inhabited by the divine, is still a prevalent belief among Hindus. The addition of facemasks to the trees further exemplifies that unless they are viewed as more human-like, worship is not possible. Through anthropomorphism and animism, each “tree is regarded as a conscious personal being, and as such receives adoration and sacrifice.”²¹ Therefore, one may assume that nature would benefit from the devotion it will receive. However, if the goal is to protect the divine, it is likely that the actions taken will not be in the best interest of the trees and the groves.

18 *Ibid.*, 51.

19 *Ibid.*, 8.

20 *Ibid.*, 9.

21 *Ibid.*, 7.

Tree worship may allow for the belief that the trees and groves will be under proper protection, but, in fact, the practice of anthropomorphism can actually counteract the protection environmentalists work towards. When humans assign human-like characteristics to a tree, a label is placed on it indicating that the tree is “just like us.” When this occurs, humankind strips the tree of its voice. In return, the tree will not necessarily be properly cared for since the devotees will not account for what the tree needs in order to survive. Humans will instead provide different necessities that they think the tree needs because it is not regarded as simply a tree with the basic needs of a plant, but instead as an embodied form of the divine. The tree, therefore, will be given what the gods desire, which many not be what the tree itself actually needs. For instance, it is common knowledge that in order for a tree to survive, it must get ample water and sunlight. Deities, however, may desire other offerings that will not support the growth and health of a tree and may even harm it.

One example of a display of disregard for the well being of the trees is the construction of pipal tree shrines. According to the chronological hierarchy of pipal tree shrines, the most basic of them all “just a bare patch of ground at the base of an unadorned tree where water offerings are poured, flowers or other offerings are placed, and into which sticks of incense are inserted.”²² This type of shrine is the most basic; however, it is the most environmentally conscious. Next in complexity is “a circular plantar-like container,” with the plantar usually being constructed out of stone or concrete.²³ The roots of a tree are said to extend out as far as the covering of its leaves, so the placement of a concrete platform around the base of the tree prevents the roots from absorbing enough water. The next upgrade of the pipal tree shrine “entails building a temple enclosure around the entire tree, leaving a hole in the roof of the structure for a trunk to penetrate.”²⁴ This type of shrine is the most environmentally destructive and, like the others, does not consider the needs of the tree but only the desires of the gods. All of these shrines are built to facilitate proper worship, often sidelining the needs of trees in the process. The concrete platforms can serve as altars since they allow for standing, sitting, and the placement of offerings.²⁵ However, they negatively contribute to the destruction of the community’s trees given that through the practice of anthropomorphism, the voice of the tree is lost. Although there are instances where the tree is protected from being chopped down, the basic needs that must be met in order to maintain the tree are not taken into consideration.

22 Ibid., 81.

23 Ibid., 81.

24 Ibid., 85.

25 Ibid., 87.

Another demonstration of a disregard for the needs of trees is the construction of roads that interfere with sacred groves. Many of these roads were created to provide access to things such as education, employment, and more efficient travel. These roads ran along side of sacred groves, but villagers decided they “wanted to clear a path from the road to the shrine.”²⁶ In terms of devotion to the gods, this addition to the sacred groves is one that makes access to them much easier; however, the building of roads through groves does not take into account the protection of the trees in the area. As road construction began, “the forest department then began auctioning off the forest... people were allowed to keep the trees immediately surrounding the shrines.”²⁷ Although there is considerably more access to the shrines due to these roads, nature was not protected in the process. Not only did the construction of roads destroy the local habitat, but it also contributed to pollution. In fact, Kent points out that “roads were originally denied because of their supposedly polluting nature,” yet, we see that they were later constructed anyway.²⁸ The pollution and traffic caused by the newly implemented roads are incredibly destructive to the environment, revealing that Hindus do not always take into account the needs of nature; protecting the biodiversity in their countries, in this case and others, does not take precedence over worship.

In many locations where tree worship is prevalent, it is forbidden to cut down or damage a tree. This is classified by Eliza Kent as “accidental environmentalism” because the trees are inadvertently being saved from harm. She proves this point by concluding that “the religiosity surrounding sacred groves is not primitive, nor does it revolve around the worship of nature.”²⁹ It instead revolves around the worship and protection of the embodied divine. In addition, Haberman addresses this issue through the argument of Emma Tomalin. She would agree with Kent, claiming that “any protection of biodiversity was coincidental rather than intentional.”³⁰ My interview with Mrs. Love confirmed this point as well, causing us to conclude that the goal of Hindus is to protect bio-divinity, “the notion that nature is infused with divinity,”³¹ as opposed to biodiversity.

Furthermore, with regard to the second tier of my question, the worship of trees as the residence of a god causes the tree to be unintentionally harmed in attempt to preserve the home of a deity. Thus, one could argue that Hindus cannot be considered environmentalists since their intended devotion and love is solely

26 Kent, *Sacred Groves and Local Gods*, 62.

27 *Ibid.*, 61.

28 *Ibid.*, 58.

29 *Ibid.*, 10.

30 Haberman, *People Trees*, 195.

31 *Ibid.*, 195.

for the gods and is not based off of the needs of trees. Given the fact that the trees are being worshiped as embodied forms of the divine or as residences for the gods, the worshiper views a tree as more human-like through anthropomorphism. In facilitating darsan, the tree loses its identity as solely a tree, often resulting in failure to attend to the trees' needs. The shrines constructed to facilitate worship, as well as construction of roads that destroy the habitat needed for the growth of trees, prove that the needs of a tree are not taken into consideration. Eliza Kent refers to tree and grove worshipers as "accidental environmentalists" because they aim to love the sacred trees, but one could argue that they can not be considered true environmentalists because in order to fully love the trees, worshipers have to first make them more human. This causes the trees to be essentially forgotten as they are provided with necessities intended for worship as opposed to those intended for the preservation of nature.

WORKS CITED

- Haberman, David L. *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Kent, Eliza F. *Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.