

Significance of Āyurvedic Trees in the Vedas: Present & Future Perspectives

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Abstract

The Vedas are the oldest scriptures in this Universe and it is the source of all knowledge. These are known as the divine or origin. These Vedas contain systematic scientific knowledge as well as knowledge of the creation of the world. Every type of knowledge is available in these Vedas. The Āyurveda is a part of the Vedas and it deals with various diseases, medicines, trees, plants, etc.

Generally, the tree may be defined as a perennial plant having fully distinguishable root and shoot system. In general, they are woody with well developed vascular tissue. The earliest mention of the trees is found in the Ṛgveda, the oldest repository of human knowledge. A long hymn (X.97) of the Ṛgveda is devoted to worshipping the trees and plants with special reference to their healing properties. In the Atharvaveda or Brahma Veda trees and plants are also mentioned with special reference to their healing properties and their capacity of warding off the demons. In the Ṛgveda, the cult of trees is well recognized. Therefore, the trees were implored to bestow for good offspring, various worldly amenities and also for long life without any disease.

Keywords: Vedas, Vṛkṣa, sacrifice, tree worship and cosmic tree.

The tree is known as *Vṛkṣa* in Sanskrit. Hence, the word *Vṛkṣa* is general term for tree in the Saṁhitās and post Vedic literature. There are twelve synonyms of *Vṛkṣa* (*Vṛśchyate chedyate iti Vṛkṣa*—that which is cut) found in the Amarakośa (IV.25) such as: *Mahīruha* (--that which grows on the earth), *Śākhī* (--that which has branches), *Pādapa* (--that which drinks sap with roots), *Taru* (*taranti anena ātapam*—that by which people overcome heat), *Anokaha* (*anasaḥ śakataśyākam gatiṁ hanti*—that which obstructs the pace of a cart), *Kuṭa*, *Śāla*, *Palāśa* (--that which have leaves), *Dru*, *Druma* (– that which has a part of the tree), and *Agama* (*na gacchati iti agama*—that which does not move). From the following Ṛgvedic mantra (Ṛgveda, I.130.4) : “*taṣṭeva vṛkṣam vanino ni vṛścāsi paraśveva ni vṛścāsi*”, the etymology of *Vṛkṣa* can be assumed. So, the term *vṛkṣa* could be derived from the root *vraśc-* meaning ‘to crash down or cut down’ (*vṛkṣo vraścānāt*) (Nirukta, II.16.). The names of different *Vṛkṣas* are found in the Vedic Literature, as: *Aśvattha*, *Udumbara*, *Karkandhu*, *Khadira*, *Nyagrodha*, *Palāśa*, *Pippala*, *Bilva*, *Śamī*, *Śālmālī*, etc. At the time of Vedic sacrifice the woods, leaves, fruits and flowers of the trees are needed. So, before cutting the trees or

śākhās of the trees, the priest used to worship the trees with chanting the Vedic mantras. Besides, for making utensils used in the sacrifice and *yūpa*, etc., the necessity of the woods of the trees is essential.

Regarding the importance of the *Vṛkṣas* the Taittirīya Saṁhitā (IV.5.8; Taittirīya Saṁhitā, IV. 5. 2) says: “*namo vṛkṣebhyo harikeśebhyo*”—homage to the trees with green tress. In the Rudrādhyāya, the above *mantra* occurs and homage is paid to Lord Rudra. The connection between Rudra and green trees is interesting. In the Atharvaveda (XVIII.2.25), tree (*vṛkṣa*) denotes the coffin made from a tree, no doubt by hallowing it out. Generally, the tree is called *Vanaspati* or a large forest tree, especially one that bears fruit apparently without any blossoms (Apte, 1988 : 490). The word *Vanaspati* (lit. lord of the forest) appears to have originally denoted trees in general. The meaning of the term came to be contracted in later times when it used to mean a tree bearing fruits without flowering. The word *Vana* appears in the early stages to denote trees in a collective sense.

In the Vedas, we find traces of *Vṛkṣa* worship, as the *Vṛkṣas* are regarded to be incarnations or symbols of the various gods or deities. Many conjectures have been prevalent regarding the origin of tree worship among the idolatrous people. The reason may be simple enough. Was it not most natural that the persons who worshipped many different objects should offer homage to trees or *Vanaspatis* pre-eminently valuable as a source and basis of material wealth? They are, therefore, worshipped as gods to show the high value they contain in them. Besides, trees are also worshipped as they are associated with various Hindu mythologies. To understand man, it is essential that one must understand the world of trees or *Vṛkṣas*. Man may be isolated by the power of reasoning and intellectual pursuit, but one can not afford to isolate man from the tree world. However, the relationship between man and trees is based on religion. Everything is consecrated at the altar of religion. There is a long list of sacred trees, which are associated with the Hindu religion. Hence, in the Ṛgveda, the cult of trees and, above all, the forest trees is well recognized. It is invoked in a few passages along with the waters and mountains. In the later Maṇḍalas of the Ṛgveda, the trees are the favorite homes of the gods and goddesses. Therefore, when a marriage procession happens to pass by the trees, deities (*Vana-devatās*) are prayed to for favour. In the marriage rituals also the use of the parts of trees is one of the common features. It is also seen that the Vedic literature bears no mention of marriage of a person to a tree which in modern Hindu world precedes certain classes of marriage. The sacrificial posts are to be made from the tree and this belief about the trees is the same as that adopted in the domestic ritual. The tree, when it is made into the form of a post, is adorned profusely which proves its living character.

Hence, it is obvious that the Vṛkṣas or trees are being respectfully worshipped for their good qualities and other valuable contributions to the human-beings in the society, since time immemorial. Trees provide sweet fruits, which are rich in nutritional value. Besides, the woods and leaves of the trees are also highly useful for the men for financial, medicinal and spiritual reasons. No one can deny the usefulness of trees in the society. Therefore, trees command respect from human-beings. However, it is widely acknowledged in Hindu religion that trees are the abodes of different gods and goddesses. Therefore, tree worship emerged and it is now a very popular aspect of the society.

Thus, we find that trees were intimately associated with the life of the ancient Indians. Naturally a spirit of enquiry grew among them as to the effect of trees growing near their dwelling places. While some trees were regarded as salutary, others were looked upon as bad. This sort of speculation originated as early as the Vedic period. It is learnt from the Vedas that Vedic people believed some trees to be haunts of evil spirits. For example, Gobhila Gṛhya Sūtra (IV.7) holds that Aśvattha involves danger of fire to the house; Udumbara leads to optical diseases, etc. In the Bṛhat--Saṁhitā, such trees as Aśoka, Punnāga, etc. are conducive to welfare. From the Atharvaveda we learn that trees and plants were used not only for the preservation and improvement of health but also for the acquisition of sons and warding off the influence of evil spirits.

Our sacred scriptures have shown various ways to lead a pious and holy life. It is known that the four *Āśramas*, viz. *Brahmacārya*, *Gārhaṣṭhya*, *Vānaprastha* and *Sannyāsa*, were existing in our Vedic society. Each of the *āśramas* constitutes a stage of life in which the individual has to train himself for a certain period and exert himself within the circuit of the same to qualify him for the next. In the *Vānaprastha-āśrama*, the man has to live in the forest after completion of fifty years of his life for securing the liberation of his soul. In this third stage of life, a man has to live in the forest for getting spiritual perfection and final salvation. In this *āśrama*, the forests played a vital role in conceiving this resolution and life of seclusion. The choice of vegetable food is essential. Meditation and contemplation of God is easy in the lap of nature under the trees. The union with the Absolute is attained in the jungle, *i.e.* in the shadow of trees, where air dare not infiltrate. In addition to these, it is also known that not only men, sages and seers, but gods also meditated under the cool shade of the trees of the forests. A number of seers attained the light of wisdom and liberation in their meditation under the tree. Hence, the trees or Vṛkṣas play a significant role for providing good environment to a spiritual man or a seer for proper living and attaining the emancipation or Supreme Peace.

Besides, for performing sacrifices one has to collect woods from the sacrificial trees. According to the Atharvaveda *Pariśiṣṭa*, the following trees are said to

be useful to sacrifices, viz. Śamī, Aśvattha, Palāśa, Khadira, Vikarṅkata, Kāśmarya, Udumbara and Bilva. (*Śamyāśvathah palāśasca khādiro 'tha vikaṅkataḥ /*

Kāśmayourdumbaro bilvo yajña vṛkṣasāḥ prakīrtitāḥ // Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭa, XXIII.6.5) Generally, a question arises whether the fruits and flowers of a tree can be used if it is planted in an impure place, i.e. burial ground? Its answer is given by the Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra as:

*Amedhyeṣu ye vṛkṣā uptāḥ phalopagāḥ /
teṣāmapī na dūṣyanti puṣpāṇi ca phalāni ca // (Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra, I.6.9.4)*

It means, the fruit-bearing trees even if they have been planted in an impure place; still its fruits or flowers are not being considered as defiled, i.e. the fruits and flowers of these trees can be used in the sacrifice or in any other worship.

In the Gṛhya Sūtras (Śāṅkhyāyana Gṛhya Sūtra, II.1.18-20), *Palāśa*, *Nyagrodha* and *Udumbara*, somewhere *Bilva* also have been declared as sacrificial trees (*yājñika vṛkṣā*). The staffs (*daṇḍas*) of the *Brahmacārins* should be made from the auspicious sacrificial trees. In the Āśvalāyana Gṛhya Sūtra (I.19.13), the *Palāśa* has been prescribed for Brahmins, *Udumbara* for Kṣatriya's and *Bilva* for Vaiśya's staff (Upanayana daṇḍa). But in the Gautama Dharma Sūtra, the staff of the Brahmin should be made of the wood of *Bilva* or *Palāśa* tree (*Vailvopālāsau brāhmaṇadaṇḍau //*). In the Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra, the actual size of the staff is also prescribed for different castes. As rightly said:

mūrdhā lalāṭa nāsāgrapramāṇā yājñikasya vṛkṣasya daṇḍāḥ // (Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra, I.2.3.16)

The size of staff of the *Brahmacārins* should be up-to the head, forehead and nose. Because, their sizes also have been specified according to the caste of the students, e.g. Brahmin's staff should reach up-to his nose, that of a *Kṣatriya* should reach up-to the forehead and that of a *Vaiśya* should be up-to his hair (Cf. Śāṅkhyāyana Gṛhya Sūtra, II.1.21-23). But the Āśvalāyana Gṛhya -Sūtra opined about this staff just in reverse order (Āśvalāyana Gṛhya Sūtra, I.19.13). Beside wood of the trees, the colour or rasa of the trees was also used for the garments or dresses of the *Brahmacārins*. The garment of a Brahmin *Brahmacārī* should be dyed with a red colour dye produced from a tree. And the garment of rest two castes (*Kṣatriya* and *Vaiśya*) should be dyed with madder or turmeric colour, produced from the tree. Hence, in this way, the trees and its colours are very useful for various purposes, as prescribed in the Vedic texts.

In the Vedic tradition, creation is conceived of as a tree. This cosmic tree is called *Aśvattha*. All the gods are seated on its branches. This is the tree of eternal life as existing on the universal plane and also in each individual centre. In the Indian religious tradition, this tree is elaborately described with respect to its roots,

leaves, branches, stem, fruits, sap, source, and existence in time and space. The three worlds, the three divisions of time, the three gods are all comprehended by the cosmic *Aśvattha*. In the Ṛgveda, it is called Vanaspati, the Lord of the forests; its stately existence and the erect stature between the earth and heaven justify this majestic description. It is called the tree with a thousand branches (*Sahasravalśa vanaspat*) (Ṛgveda, VII.33.9). Each Universe is like a branch of this tree, being kept green with foliage by the sap that runs through the body of the tree. The branch, the tree and the forest, all represent an integrated pattern, *i.e.* the tree forms an assemblage in the forest and the forest is an aggregate of trees. The universe is conceived of as the forest and each world as a tree stands therein. Both are aspects of Brahman. In the Ṛgveda, we see the following verse, asking about the forest and the tree from which heaven and earth were fashioned:

*kiṁsvidvanam ka u sa vrkṣa āsa
yato dyāvāprthivī niṣṭatakṣuḥ/
maniṣiṇo manasāprcchatedu tad
yadadhyatiṣṭhad bhuvanāni dhārayan// (Ibid., X.81.4)*

The answers to the questions posed here are available in a verse preserved in the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa, in which Brahman is said to be the forest and the tree functioning both as the efficient and material cause of creation, as well as its support. The verse is as follows:

*brahma tadvanam brahmas a u vrkṣa
āsa yato dyāvāprthivī niṣṭatakṣuḥ/
maniṣiṇo manasā pra bravīmi tad brahmā-
yadadhyatiṣṭhad bhuvanāni dhārayan// (Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa, II.8.9.6.)*

The cosmic tree is loaded with green foliage (*supalāśa*) and each leaf is said to represent the Vedas, *i.e.* the wisdom or thought of the Creator which is manifest completely at every living point of tree. Each leaf or the smallest blade of green grass is a picture of Prajāpati; as he is, so is this. The constituents of *prāṇa* or the life principle are three fold both in the cosmos and in each organism. As a matter of fact, in the words of modern science, an individual cell is the tiniest constituent of life and whatever exists in the universe as the mystery which creates life is also present with all its heavenly and earthly powers in the centre of the cell. Thus, in the Kena Upaniṣad, the smallest sample of *prāṇa* is called *ṭṭṇa*, a blade of grass of which the mystery is not comprehended by the gods, Agni and Vāyu, and in the presence of which Indra also disappears. The mystery appears as a Yakṣa, which literally is the symbol of the mysterious tree. Its secret is revealed only to Haimavatī -Umā, the Great Goddess, who is the Mother and who gives birth to the life principle that is *prāṇa*. (Agrawala : 74.)

Besides *Aśvattha*, some other trees were also worshipped in the Vedic period. These trees are: *Khadira* (Ṛgveda (RV) III.53.19, AV III.6.1; V. 5. 5, etc.), *Palāśa*

or *Kimśuka* (RV X. 85.20; AV III.5.4.8, etc.), *Nyagrodha* (RV I.24.7; AV IV.37.4, V. 5.5, etc.), *Śamī* (AV VI.11.1; Taittirīya Saṁhitā, V.1.9.6; Kāṭhaka Saṁhitā, XXXVI.6, etc.) *Vaṭa*, *Bilva*, *Neem*, etc.

In Vedic India, we find that various agricultural and sacrificial appliances and vessels were made of wood. The Vibhīdaka tree (RV VII.86.6; X.34.1) supplied the wood with which dice (*akṣa*) were made. The juice, extracted from Soma, which has not yet been definitely identified, was regarded as the most exhilarating drink. The familiarity of ancient Indians with the various matters relating to the plant kingdom is evident from such terms as *Vṛkṣāyurveda* which means the science of treatment of trees and plant diseases. Gradually man came to learn a lot about the medicinal value of fruits, roots, herbs, leaves, etc. In ancient India, we find a number of trees and plants of therapeutic value. In course of time, the flowers provided by trees served to give delight to people, and came to be used as offerings to gods, goddesses and near and dear ones on happy occasions. The Indian civilization was mainly based on forests. The Upaniṣads, the products of the highest human wisdom, had originated in the sylvan surroundings. The seers of old meditated in the sequestered forest far away from the madding crowd of people, and gave the world gems of thought. That the solitude of the forest was favorable to meditation is attested by the very title *Āraṇyakas* of which the Upaniṣads formed parts. The forest provided shelters not only to the recluse but also to worldly men in the third stage, *i.e.* *Vānaprastha* of their lives.

Besides, at the time of a Vedic sacrifice in the Vedic society it was the custom to cut a branch of these sacred trees and bring it home with proper ceremony. This tree cult gave rise to a class of temple as residence of the God. In early stages, a tree is excavated and in that excavated hollow is put the effigy of the solar deity to rest. In course of time, this resting hollow of the solar deity was turned to a type of temples with round dome resembling rounded shape of the branches of the tree. From the conception of the tree worship current among various nations it is evident that the cult of tree was not a savage or barbarous cult. It arose in the societies with a given amount of refinement and culture.

Conclusion

This way, we find that the trees or *Vṛkṣas* were intimately associated with the life of the ancient Indians. Hence, it can be said that the trees played a vital role to provide all type of pleasures to the human beings in various occasions.

Regarding the conservation of trees now a day our Government is taking steps to plant new trees and preserves the old trees. It is also fully restricted by the Government to not to cut trees without any reason. The Govt. is also propagating the Madicinal values of trees and plants and trying it best to create awareness

among the people regarding the Scientific as well as Religious value of trees. The society must be benefitted by the medicinal qualities of the trees in a less effort and less investment. Hence, it can be said that the people should preserve the trees and plants for the welfare of the society.

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