

Woman and the tree motif

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IN India the belief that Vanadevata or the Tree Spirits inhabit the trees is age old which explains the taboo on cutting down the trees. The Tree Spirit is independent of the tree which is merely its abode and if it becomes imperative to cut down the tree, then the Tree Spirit is given the chance of shifting to another tree.

In most religions the world over, particularly so in the East, it is the women who are the custodians of beliefs, upholders of traditions and perform the religious rituals. Since a large number of women in India not having the benefit of a formal education are illiterate, they have become ignorant and superstitious and have been performing rituals from time immemorial, seldom understanding their implication. For instance, most women who worship Vishnu, automatically worship *Ocimum sanctum*, the Tulasi plant without enquiring about the relevance of the worship. Similarly, many women worship the Banyan tree, *Ficus bengalensis* without knowing the legend connected with the tree, of Satyavan, the husband of Savitri, having died under the tree and then rejuvenated due to the steadfastness of Savitri. Similarly, the Amalaka (Aonla) tree, *Embelica officinalis* is worshipped as an incarnation of Vishnu, just as the Tulasi plant is believed to be an incarnation of Lakshmi. With such strong beliefs in the presence of Tree Spirits and women associated with the worship of trees, it was to be expected that women would be represented in art along with tree motifs. This is particularly so as the Tree Spirits were often women called Yakshis and they were worshipped by women for the gift of children.

I divide the woman and tree motif in three categories:

1. Nativity of Buddha, Mahamaya and the Tree motif.
2. Post-nativity depiction, different Tree motifs.
3. Brahminical period, women deities associated with trees.

The miraculous birth of Bodhisattva Sidhartha in the Lumbini gardens near Kapilvastu is well known. The tree,

the branches of which bent by Mahamaya, the mother of Sidhartha Gautam is variously described as a Sal tree, *Shorea robusta* (Niddanakatha); mango, *Mangifera indica* (Asokavadana); Plaksha, *Butea monosperma* (Lalita Vistara), and Ashoka tree, *Saraca asoca* (Divyavadana). But mostly the Ashoka and the Salmali, the silk cotton tree are depicted in the nativity scene of Buddha. The silk cotton tree Salmali, *Bombax ceiba* is not mentioned as having been associated with the birth of Sidhartha Gautam. This tree is depicted as a tree motif only in the Gandhara sculptures and that could be explained by the fact that none of the trees associated with the birth of Sidhartha Gautam grew in the region of Gandhara and the artisans sculpturing the nativity scene of Sidhartha must have used their imagination and depicted a five-petalled large sized flower which resembles the Salmali flower. In the Jatakas the Tree Spirits play an important role and were regularly worshipped. Even though all trees are believed to possess a Tree Spirit, the Banyan, Sal and the Salmali trees were their favourite.

To celebrate the event of Buddha's birth and to worship the tree under which Sidhartha Gautam was born, was natural. In course of time, the anniversary of his birth evolved into a special festival and later on was celebrated on other occasions also. To commemorate the auspicious occasion, the young maidens would gather in a grove of Sal trees. They would sing, dance and gather the flowers of the Sal trees and playfully throw them at each other thus getting the epithet Salabhanjika, the one who breaks the flowers of the Sal tree. This festival of women gathering the flowers of the Sal tree was common in the eastern parts of India where *Shorea robusta* trees grew in abundance and was specially celebrated in the cities associated with the life of Gautam Buddha. The Sal tree in full blossom was worshipped for offspring.

Mahamaya, the mother of Sidhartha Gautam standing cross-legged and bending the branch of a wide-spread-



PLANT MOTIF: *MANGIFERA INDICA*
 LEGEND : PARVATI'S PENANCE
 LOCATION : SRI BHAKTAVATSALAR TEMPLE,
 TIRUKKALUKKUNRAM,
 CENGALPATTU DISTRICT,
 TAMIL NADU

Photograph 1

ing tree, in her longing for creation, is commonly depicted on Buddhist shrines but apart from the Gandhara sculptures, the tree, under which Sidhartha was born is usually sculptured as the Ashoka tree even though the common belief is that he was born under the Sal tree.

In the post-nativity period gradually the festival lapsed into obscurity. In art, instead of the nativity scene, the woman or Yakshi was represented by a charming lady standing cross-legged under a tree, bending its branch with one hand and the other placed on her hip, very much the same pose as Mahamaya's during the nativity of Buddha.

During the post-Kushan Period, the woman and Tree motif became very popular and the best examples are seen from Mathura and its surroundings. By the time of the Maurya-Sunga Period, Salabhanjika motif had fully evolved and was carved on the brackets of the Buddhist Toranas, railing pillars and Stupas of Sanchi, Bharhut, Mathura, Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. The Salabhanjika became Vrikshika or the tree nymph and is shown standing under various trees, mostly in the tribhanga or the three-fold curve of her body. She is shown as a full-breasted, voluptuous woman, nude or semi-nude, heavily ornamented and wearing a highly ornamented waist girdle called Mekhala. Since the tree depicted is not the Sal tree but other trees like mango, Ashoka, Kadamba (*Anthocephalus cadamba*), Ketaki (*Pandanus odoratiss-*

simus), Arka (*Calotropis gigantea*) etc., I prefer to call these women as tree nymphs, Vrikshikas and not Salabhanjikas. In this pose mostly the women are shown standing cross-legged on a vehicle such as a Yaksha (Guhya), Swan (Hansa), Crocodile (Makara), Elephant (Gaja), a full-blown lotus and sometimes on a wine pot (Surapatra). In these sculptures of woman and Tree motif, the beauty of women compliments the beauty of vegetation. These women, possessed of voluptuousness and exciting beauty, are referred as Kama-Mohini. They were the Yakshis or Vanadevis often worshipped in ancient India for begetting children.

In the Mahabharata Vanaparva is mentioned, "Is she a nymph or a celestial damsel or an illusion or a divine creation? Feeling so, all looked at the unimpeachable beauty with folded hands"... "Who art thou that clasping the branch of the Kadamba tree, shinest all along in the hermitage, glittering like a flame of fire in the night, gently bent by the breeze. Oh! thou of fair brows? Endowed with superb charm thou art and yet fearest not in the dreadful forest! Art thou a Devi, a Yakshi, a demoness, a charming Apsara or a fair Daitya damsel or the princess-incarnate of a Naga King or a Vanachari or a female fiend or a spouse of King Varuna, or wife of Yama, Soma or of Kubera?" This mention of the Tree Spirit in the Mahabharata shows how old is the belief in Tree Spirits.



PLANT MOTIF: *PANDANUS ODORATISSIMUS*
 LEGEND : VRIKSHIKA
 LOCATION : MAHABAN, AT PRESENT MATHURA MUSEUM
 C. 2nd CENT. A.D.

Photograph 2



MESUA FERREA, Chanda Yakshini with the Nag-kesar tree: Bharhut, 1st century B.C.

Photograph 3

A common belief called Dohada is that the Ashoka tree will only flower if kicked by the left foot of a beautiful damsel particularly if she is under the influence of intoxication. In the words of Coomarswamy, "the tree is represented as feeling, like a woman. Such a longing, nor can its flowers open until it is satisfied...." Such a conception preserves the old connection between trees, tree spirits and human life. This belief has a similarity with the hero (Nayaka) who does not yearn for his lady love unless he has been stroked with the left foot of a charming woman under intoxication. This belief and the custom of Dohada was prevalent among the women in ancient India and was adapted in art motif of the Sunga period showing a woman standing cross-legged under the Ashoka tree with her left foot against the trunk of the tree.

A slight deviation of the dohada belief and representation is seen from Bharhut where a Yakshini called Chula-Koka-devata is shown standing on an elephant under the Ashoka tree and instead of kicking the tree trunk, she holds a branch of the tree in her right arm and her left arm and leg clasps the stem suggesting thereby the blossoming of the Ashoka tree not by a kick of her foot but by an embrace. Another equally interesting tree motif on a railing pillar from Bharhut shows a Yakshi profusely covered with ornaments, standing on a seated winged horse with her right leg on its back and the left foot on his head and clasping the trunk of the Naga-Kesar

tree (*Mesua ferrea*).

The belief that women have miraculous power of fertility which they could pass to the trees expanded the idea of woman and tree motif to cover many other trees, such as the Bakula tree (*Mimusops elangai*) which was believed to flower only when a damsel sprinkled on it intoxicants from her mouth or the Kurbaka (unidentified) which blossoms when a damsel rubs her breasts on the tree trunk.

Among the large number of trees which are considered as Tree motif, includes the Pandanus tree (*Pandanus odorotissimus*) which is strange as the Pandanus plant has sword like elliptical leaves with spines on its edges and to stand under it would be very uncomfortable. This is a frequently depicted Tree motif and one of them shows a woman standing on a dwarf under the tree and playing with her pet parrot.

Among the unusual Tree motifs is *Calotropis gigantea*, the Arka plant, where a woman is standing under the tree on guard carrying a sword. Women as guards must have been common as there is a Tree motif where a woman is seen doing a sword dance under the Kadamba (*Anthocephalus cadamba*) tree. Also, women must have been used to taking intoxicating drinks as they are depicted standing under a tree of Kadamba with a glass



PLANT MOTIF: SARACA ASOCA
 LEGEND : VRIKSHIKA
 LOCATION : VRINDABAN, MATHURA, UTTAR PRADESH
 C. 1ST CENTURY B.C.

Photograph 4

full of some drink presumably an intoxicating drink.

There are two motifs of a woman standing under the Champaka tree (*Michelia champaca*). In one panel is seen a woman carrying a tray full of toilet articles in one hand and a basket in the other. There is a mention by Kalidasa in his *Raghuvamsa* about this episode where a woman is carrying toilet articles and going through a forest of Champaka trees. There must have been forests of *Michelia champaca* in Madhya Pradesh from where these Tree motifs are found. At present, though the tree of Champaka is found in the ever green forests of Madhya Pradesh, there are no exclusive forests of this tree to be seen. The other panel with Champaka tree as the Tree motif shows a nude woman, heavily jewelled, standing in the tribhanga style under a tree of Champaka, cross-legged and holding a branch of the tree with one hand.

Another very popular tree motif is the Mango tree which is a fertility symbol and is considered highly auspicious. Mango tree is depicted in various contexts in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain sculptures.

In the Brahminical period, the mango tree motif is used in various themes such as a woman and tree motif, a couple standing under the mango tree or the tree associated with Parvati, the wife of Shiva. Parvati did penance to win Shiva as a husband and she is depicted standing on one leg under the mango tree with four fires burning on the four sides and the sun blazing above. The mango Tree motif is present in Jain art where Ambika, a Jain deity is seen sitting or standing under a mango tree but always accompanied with a small child which is understandable as the mango tree is a symbol of fertility.

The Nyagrodha tree, *Ficus bengalensis* is associated with Shiva and naturally, therefore, is associated with his consort Kali. Here the woman in the Tree motif is totally different from the charming damsels of the Kushan period. Kali, the goddess of death as Vatapatreshwari, she of the Vata tree, after Shiva as Vatapatreshwar, the god of the Banyan tree, is depicted. Vata is another popular Sanskrit name of the Banyan tree. Kali sits under this tree in all her grotesqueness, wearing a garland of skulls and holding one skull in her hand, the skulls hanging from the Banyan tree, skulls of the victims of Kali's wrath for she kills evil.

Parvati is also depicted sitting under the Arka plant, *Calotropis gigantea*. A legend in the Shiva Purana mentions that Parvati when being pursued by the demons, managed to escape from being caught by them by taking

refuge in a flower of Arka, i.e. *Calotropis*. This plant has great sacred value for the Saivites.

One of the most unusual depictions is of a woman under a plant of *Monstera deliciosa* where not only the large dissected leaves of the plant are visible but also three slim rope like stems. The plant attaches itself to a wall or the tree trunk and thus climbs. There is no mention of this plant in ancient literature. The panel is a pillar decoration with a woman standing under it but since the lower portion of the woman's figure is broken, it is not possible to know if her legs are crossed.

Another unusual depiction of a plant as Tree motif is of Kamrak (*Averrhoa carambola*) with a woman standing under it. The five-angled fruit arising directly from the bark of the tree are very clear even though stylised. This Tree motif is understandable as the fruits of Kamrak are very sour to taste and women in their dohada longings during pregnancy like sour fruits.

In conclusion we see that women being the custodians of rituals and beliefs which they pass on from one generation to the other, are sculptured as art motifs under trees with which they are closely associated. Women and the Tree motifs are some of the most beautiful depictions in art and are sculptured not only in a very realistic manner but are aesthetically very pleasing to see.

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