

Leaves of life

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Leaves are perishable, fragile, prone to nature's cycle and yet they endure by renewing themselves constantly. In being both of the moment and eternal, connected with death and yet sustaining life, they approach the very quality of myths. No wonder then that in India, there are many stories and myths intricately linked with different leaves.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna declares himself immensely pleased with the offering of a single leaf, of any kind, from a devotee. The sincerity of the gesture gilds that simple offering with gold. Of course, knowing that Krishna is partial to the leaves of the tulsi plant, it might be wiser to offer him the small, crinkled leaves of that singular plant rather than test him with any others.

The story of Tulsi emphasises the tremendous power of chastity. The gods could not destroy a mighty demon called Shankhachuda so long as his wife Tulsi remained faithful to him. When Vishnu assumed the guise of her husband and slept with her, Shiva pierced the shield of invincibility she had built around her husband and killed him. To placate Tulsi for having deceived her, Vishnu promised to marry her, now turned into a plant, in the form of a saligrama stone.

Most homes in India have a special place for the tulsi plant, worshipping not only Tulsi Devi as the purest among goddesses but also venerating it for its medicinal qualities. Perhaps our seers ensured that certain good practices, by being enshrined in custom and beliefs, were carried forward across generations.

It is interesting that Shiva is never worshipped with tulsi, only with smooth bilva, for the gods Shiva and Vishnu strictly demarcate their territories through leaves. A single bilva leaf offered to Shiva is enough for him to grant freedom from the endless cycle of life and death in return.

Many aeons ago, a hunter being chased by a lion climbed up a tree and had to spend the entire moonless night perched on a branch. To pass time, and forget his hunger, he plucked the leaves surrounding him and dropped them into the echoing darkness. Directly below there was a shivalinga and the hunter had unwittingly, on the most auspicious Shivaratri night, worshipped it with the leaves of the bilva tree in which he was ensconced. That repetitive but significant act, devoid of any aim of furthering his self-interest, had the effect of delighting Shiva.

Perhaps the most sophisticated and subtle use of the bilva leaf as symbol involves the Chidambaram rahasya or the hidden mystery of Chidambaram. Of the five basic elements, water, air, fire, ether and earth, Shiva is worshipped as ether in the Chidambaram temple. It speaks of the genius of the Indian mind that insubstantial ether has been rendered tangible there with such imaginative ease. The priest whips aside the curtain of a darkened chamber and the devotee catches a quick glimpse of golden points of light suspended in air: the vast unknowable is known only by the gold bilva leaves adorning the chest of an immense incorporeal Shiva looming across space.

One of the most endearing descriptions in literature is that of Baby Krishna sucking his toe while lying in the hollow of a banyan leaf. Now everyone knows there is no leaf so big as to hold a baby but the paradox of the smallness of the leaf containing the vastness of the divine grips the mind.

The lotus is central to all forms of Indian artistic expression. In the Taittiriya Brahmana the lord of creation is inspired by the sight of an upright lotus leaf to seek what supports it. Discovering that it is rooted in the earth beneath he breaks off a piece of the earth to spread it upon the flat plate of the lotus leaf, so that the earth became that-which-is-spread. In the evocative verses of the Bhaja Govindam, Shankara says that life is as uncertain as a drop of water trembling on a lotus leaf. Shakuntala inscribed her love for Dushyanta with her nails in a letter written to him on a lotus leaf.

Places are identified in our epics by the trees grown there. Rama and Sita lived in Panchavati, or garden of Five Banyan trees before Sita was imprisoned by Ravana in a grove of Ashoka trees. The Buddha accepted the gift of an orchard of mango trees from Amrapali, the courtesan of Vaishali. Paramahansa Ramakrishna used to meditate in the Pachavati at Dakshineshwar, where five trees were planted by him, the ashoka, banyan, peepul, amlaki and bilva. In the way that no spiritual tradition in India is separate from another, Sri Ramakrishna brought the dust from a particular spot in Vrindavan and sprinkled it in this Panchavati thus invoking Krishna's presence there. To visit Belur Math is to be moved by the sight of a mango tree beneath which Swami Vivekananda often sat. The great ones have passed on but the trees remain.

It is one of the unique features of Indian civilization that we see no divide between the world of nature and that of human beings. A leaf then, in being permeated with the essence of the One Reality, is not separate from us. No one would dream of cutting a peepul or a banyan tree for to do so would be to damage oneself. This crucial understanding of one's cultural mores is what made the Chipko movement so successful.

Thus associated with myths, leaves surround us with reference points of another world, so that even while living in the present we co-exist simultaneously in other pasts, other centuries. The breeze playing with peepul leaves recalls ragas played on the vina, reminds us that Shiva seats himself beneath its branches as Dakshinamurti, where also the Buddha attained enlightenment. An obdurate blade of grass was all that virtuous Sita required as a barrier between her and Ravana. When Parvati undertook the most severe of penances to attain the hand of Shiva, she gave up eating even leaves, *parna*, and girls are named Aparna in her honour.

Pleased with her austerities, when Parvati worshipped him as a linga made of sand, Shiva revealed himself to her under a lone mango tree, *ekammra*. That tree, nearly 3500 years old, can still be seen in Kanchipuram, as the sthala vriksha or temple tree of the Ekambreshwar temple. To circumambulate that venerable tree is to participate in Parvati's adoration of Shiva and to make it a part of one's own experience of life.

Leaves of trees, plants, shrubs, as markers of myth, also carry us forward into the future when we will no longer be around in our present incarnations. The form of the tree remains even if the particular leaf does not, just as generations succeed each other even while individuals both die and are forgotten in time. So we can imagine that future too, where clothed in different bodies, our re-born souls will recognize the Tulsi plant and enter the fabulous vrindavan where Krishna created multiple versions of himself so that each gopi thought she danced the rasa-lila with him alone, travel through a sacred bower where the erotic loveplay of Krishna and Radha is recreated forever, or hope that an infant Andal might just materialize beneath the plant worshipped at home.

Two most enduring metaphors of Indian thought and its world-view have to do with trees. The Katha Upanishad gives us the striking image of the vast upside-down tree of life, an aswattha or peepul tree, its roots drawing sustenance from the Brahman permeating the skies, and its lush, bountiful branches spread upon this earth. Everything on earth then, life itself, entwined in these branches is rooted in the higher truth. This metaphor is repeated by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, where he also identifies himself with the peepal tree. In the Mundaka Upanisad, the soul in its human body is described very simply with the image of two birds of similar appearance perched on a leafy tree. The one on a lower branch is busy enjoying a sweet fruit, pecking busily at it while from a branch above the other bird watches with detachment. The hungry bird is the human soul subject to the field of karma, the elevated bird is the true eternal self, the One Reality that pervades everything, that remains aloof from the world of sense-experience.