Landscapes of Change: Recent Ethnography on the Religious Meanings of Trees and Forests in India

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In the myths and rituals of Hinduism, forests and trees frequently appear as hierarchies, portals where the power of the divine can be accessed in a particularly potent form. Textual scholars have advanced understanding of this phenomenon by unpacking the semantic range of concepts such as dana and aranya in classical Hindu texts, as exemplified by Francis Zimmerman’s *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats* (1988) and Charles Malamoud’s *Cooking the World* (1997). Such scholarly interest in the place of nature in religious cosmologies has recently intensified in response to threats of environmental crisis. Calls for a re-imagining of humanity’s relationship with the natural world have prompted renewed interrogation of religious traditions to find the resources for an environmental ethos.

But, as Goutam Gajula’s incisive critique of the discourse surrounding sacred groves demonstrates, generalizations about religious or cultural practices that appear to support care for nature can freeze dynamic, historically-specific phenomena into rough stereotypes. The articles gathered here all seek to provide more complex and critical renderings of particular communities’ relationship to trees or forests. We are especially interested in those trees and forests that have been set apart from ordinary usage by prohibitions and sanctions levied by the god Malaji against transgressors of his forest. The importance of the connection between divinity and place, with its own secular and sacred history, is a recurring theme in all these articles.

In our article, M.P. Ramanujam, a trained botanist, and I, a scholar of folk Hinduism in Tamil Nadu, bring together two perspectives on sacred groves that often occupy different realms of discourse to address some of the most basic questions surrounding these sites. On the one hand, we bring a scientist’s ability to define measurable standards of plant density and species richness to address the question, “Are these groves really ‘islands of biodiversity’ in landscapes otherwise almost totally denuded? How do we know?” And on the other, we bring a humanist’s sensitivity to the meanings with which people invest their worlds to ask, “What is sacred about these ‘sacred groves’? Why do people work so hard to protect them from human overuse?”

Goutam Gajula, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University, asks even tougher and more fundamental questions in his thoughtful examination of the history of the very idea of “sacred groves” in the first place. Based on archival research and field work conducted in Kerala towards his Ph.D. dissertation, which is entitled “The Rule of Sanctuary,” Gajula’s article analyzes the rising interest among environmentalist-historians and ecologists in “indigenous ecological traditions” within India. He argues that the romantic image of indigenous peoples and peasants that has emerged out of this interest is symptomatic of a liberal discourse on multiculturalism.
that selectively embraces only those aspects of other people’s culture and way of life that it finds palatable and easily contained.

While coming from different disciplinary perspectives and focusing on different cultures within India, we hope that these articles represent a new wave of scholarship that presents fuller, more truthful descriptions of the beliefs and practices surrounding sacralized nature, or the naturalized sacred. Today, environmental issues truly are of urgent, world-wide concern, and the ways humans have conceptualized the natural world and structured our relationships with it deserve careful attention. Surely, the consumption patterns of cosmopolitan intellectuals have a greater impact on the global environment than do the religious cosmologies and customs of the mostly rural folk that we find so fascinating. Nonetheless, we hope that these glimpses into the diverse ways that people (including ourselves) have imagined the relationship between gods, humans and the natural world will prove instructive, even inspiring. Many thanks are due to M.D. Muthukumaraswamy, editor-in-chief of Indian Folklife, and C.V.M. Leellavathi, associate editor, for giving us the opportunity to share these fresh findings from our fieldwork.

References


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**Darubrahma:**

The Continuing Story of Wood, Trees, and Forests in the Ritual Fabric of Jagannath

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Recently, in mid-2006, a new Bhaktivedanta Ashram temple was opened in the village of Kuansh, Bhadrak district, Orissa. Although it was especially the new temple’s policy of welcoming all devotees, including foreign devotees and people from tribal and adivasi communities, which drew attention to their America-born priest, the most amazing aspect of his venture was that he emphatically claimed that the new wooden statues of the four main deities of Lord Jagannatha, Baladeva, Subhadra, and Sudarshana, were made “strictly according to the Puri tradition and the scriptures.” As their website boldly stated,

> For more than one year, work on these deities has been carrying on under the guidance of Puri temple priests so that every detail of the process was done strictly according to the Puri tradition and the scriptures.” As their website boldly stated,

For more than one year, work on these deities has been carrying on under the guidance of Puri temple priests so that every detail of the process was done strictly according to the Puri tradition and the scriptures. Deities were made as exact replicas of the original deities in Puri, incorporating the traditional procedures undertaken for the Navakalevara festival (the change of Lord Jagannatha’s body held every 12 years in Puri).2

Familiar with the highly secret procedures of the Navakalevara from research I had conducted for my book on rituals around sacred trees in India, I became intrigued by these statements. If indeed they had followed exactly the same procedure the Puri temple uses when periodically renewing the four wooden deities, this would provide a chance to research certain aspects of this procedure from which all but the most intimate functionaries are barred, especially the highly mysterious transfer of the life essence (brahmapadartha) from the old statue to the new one. I frantically tried to contact the authorities of the newly established temple but did not succeed in finding the right spokesperson knowledgeable enough to answer my rather prodding and intense questions.

What I intend to do in this article, therefore, may not be satisfactory in the sense of disclosing the ultimate secrets of the wooden statues, alas, but may well serve as a report on a work-in-progress. This will, I hope, derive part of its merit from formulating relevant questions for further research in Bhadrak itself.

From these introductory words we can distill our major themes and connect them with the subject of this special issue. In Part One, I describe the ritual procedures through which these wooden Bhadrak statues were reportedly produced. These claims which will be put into comparative perspective by references to the Navakalevara procedure in Puri, which the Bhadrak temple seeks to mirror. In Part Two, I chart the salience of wood, trees, and forests in the