Religion, Rituals and Conservation: A Case Study of Hinduism and the peepal Tree

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Abstract

The role of religion in the conservation of environment has not been the main focus of environmentalists as well as policy planners until a few years ago. Recently, interest in traditional systems has increased, and the importance of these in the environment and biodiversity conservation has been felt.

The rituals around peepal tree in Hinduism were selected as a model to prove if there is any conservation due to the rituals practices of common man (non indigenous) and how these rituals are affected by modernization and urbanization. Hinduism and peepal tree were selected since they are well known for their ritualistic importance. The study was conducted at three locations namely urban, semi-urban and rural in an Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. This was facilitated by the research methods like interview, participant and non-participant observation.

It was found that there is a significant amount of protection of this particular tree due to its religious and ritualistic importance. A considerable increase in the ritual activities particularly in urban areas due to influence of astrologers and media was also observed. This may have both positive and negative effects both on the tree as well as rituals.

This led us to conclude that religious and ritual activities followed by common man can be an effective tool in solving the problem of biodiversity and tree cover loss at local level. This may create a link between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Rituals, Peepal tree, Hinduism, Gods and Goddesses, tree,
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Introduction
Introduction

The world is undergoing severe ecological and environmental crisis at present. The inhabitants are experiencing the ill effects of this in the form of climate change, acid rain, ozone depletion etc. This crisis is generated by the action of human beings, the most intellectually developed creature on this earth. Several attitudinal and ideological factors have been suggested as contributing to this crisis, including the influence of the Industrial and Scientific revolutions, the development of materialism, and individualism, and a lack of confidence in the historically proven traditional systems, which were imbedded in religious and cultural heritages. (Dwivedi 1990)

The role of religion in the conservation of the environment has not been a major focus of environmentalists or policy planners until a few years ago. Religion and traditional systems were ignored to some extent in the mad race of development, modernization, urbanization and industrialization. But recently there has been an increase in interest in the traditional systems and realizing the importance of these in the environment and biodiversity conservation. Colding and Folke (2005)

Religions like Jainism, Buddhism, Shinto and Hinduism set out good examples in this regards. Their doctrines are based on the principle of respect for the creations of god. They also advocate sustainable use of natural resources by attaching certain taboos, rituals and some time superstitions to plants and animals which help in sustainable utilization of the resources.

An important piece of evidence of this is the presence of the sacred groves all over the world. These are a small area of forest dedicated to the local deity by the indigenous communities which is only used for religious and ritualistic purposes. These are living examples of how religious and ritualistic beliefs of a certain group of people can act as a well planned tool for the conservation of certain species of trees and animals. Their role in using resources in a
sustainable way cannot be ignored when discussing about the sustainable future, and planning sustainable development policies. (Khumbongmaym et al 2004)

This also gives us a hint how deep rooted environmental values, as expressed and conserved in the form of religious rituals not only by indigenous communities which are the communities inhabiting a certain geographical area and have a set of fixed rule governing their lives. In most cases they lead a lives secluded from present day world. On the other hand common men or people are a part of the modern society and interact with the changes taking palace in this world of globalization.

Since Hinduism is a religion which considers all humans and nonhumans equal and teaches, respect for all the creations of god. This is done by associating different planets, rivers, mountains, animals and plants with different gods and goddesses and giving the object the same respect as is accorded to gods and goddesses. The ancient texts of Hinduism like the Vedas, Purans, Upanishads Bhawagd Gita, Ramayana etc describe in details about the importance of these trees, animals, planets, rivers and mountains and also about their associations with different gods and goddesses. This was not only mentioned in the ancient books but is also practised on day to a day basis by the followers of this religion in the form of rituals.

A good example is tree worship and protection by the communities like Bishops of Rajasthan India who sacrificed 363 lives for protection of trees (source: Tree souls). Such paradigms serve as sources of inspiration for this study and motivated us to choose rituals connected to tree. However during the preliminary investigation it was revealed that there are a large number of rituals connected to tree worship, making it almost impossible to provide comprehensive coverage

So rituals around the peepal tree were selected which will act as a model to achieve the following aims
1) To what extent do ritual practises of common man (non indigenous) contribute in the conservation of certain species of plants?

2. What if any difference is observed in the rituals in three types of locations, dwelling places namely: urban, semi urban and rural?

3. If there are differences, what is their significance and what accounts for them?

The peepal tree was selected because it is one of the most widely accepted religious trees by not only Hindus but also by Buddhist and Jain religions as well. The rituals around this tree were studied in three locations namely i.e. urban, semi urban and rural in order to gain a glimpse of change and also the effects of urbanization and modernization.

This study consist of a brief description of Hinduisms view about ecology followed by how it associates different Gods and Goddesses with elements of nature and what are the rituals connected to them. Further discussion about sacred groves, religious environmental and ritualistic importance of peepal tree has been done. The findings are summed up in the result and discussion section.

These investigations helped us to establish that modernization and urbanization are threats to these local approaches to conservation but still if necessary steps are taken, there is hope of finding a balance between the two poles of modernity and tradition.
...sicated deep in the heart of the universe. They symbolize the sun, the moon and the planets. Hindus believe that the Navgrah (nine planets) have powers over the destinies of individuals, communities and nations.
Hinduism’s view about ecology and conservation

There are many religions and beliefs in the world today, are an integral part of the different societies. The development of civilizations has shown how these religions have evolved over time. During the process of development some religions vanished and some are on the edge of extinction, but some religions have grown and the number of their followers has increased over the time. Among them the most important ones are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism with Hinduism being one of the oldest.

The evidence of Hinduism can be traced back up till the Indus valley civilization “It evolved out of the rich culture of ancient India. Between 3000 and 1500 BC” This civilization was spread in the north west of present India and Pakistan which is why India is considered as the birth place of Hinduism.

Hinduism is believed to be one of the oldest surviving religions in the world and is among the most unique religions as well. It is a religion which has no founder. The researchers in this field support this argument by saying that “It is not one religion, but rather a family of religions... Hinduism is fluid and changing... Hinduism is the whole complex of beliefs and institutions that have appeared from the time when their ancient (and most sacred) scriptures, the vedas, were composed until now... Hindus have an extraordinarily wide selection of beliefs and practices to choose from: they can (to use Western terms) be pantheists, polytheists, monotheists, agnostics, or even atheists’(John B. Noss, 1969, cited by Mc Dowell J and Stewart D.).

As discussed above, Hinduism is a very complex with many different beliefs faiths, rites, rituals and understanding. These beliefs and practices may vary from region to region and also from state to state, so we will discuss about some widely accepted ones only.

It is an evolving religion broadly following the principles illustrated in the ancient Hindu texts of the Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Bhawagd Gita etc. Despite these differences in beliefs, customs and traditions there are many things in common which bind the
religion together and have managed to sustain it for such a long time. According to Joseph Gaer “All the various sects believe in: Brahmin, the eternal Trimutri, or Three-in-One God: Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Shiva, the Destroyer; Submission to Fate, since man is not outside, but part of Brahmin.” (1963 cited by Dowell J and Stewart D 1993).

Regardless of the differences one thing which is commonly practiced and discussed in all Hindu religions books is the connection to nature (ecology) and the environment. There are numerous examples in these books clearly reflecting how deep rooted is the concept of conservation in Hindu religion. Books like the Vedas, Purans and Upanishads spread the message of nature conservation one of the most famous and important Hindu book Bhagavad-Gita in the third chapter narrates “a life without contribution toward the preservation of ecology is a life of sin and a life without specific purpose or use.” (Source: Alliance of religions and conservation ARC).

According to Weeramantry C. G, “the most ancient texts on Hinduism demonstrate through the praise of the deities an ecological awareness and great respect for the natural world. There are many specific teachings on environmental matters contained in all these writings and ecological activists have drawn much inspiration from the text. A few examples are:

* "Do not cut trees, because they remove pollution." (Rig Veda, 6:48:17)
* "Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere." (Yajur Veda, 5:43)
* Destruction of forests is taken as destruction of the state, and reforestation an act of rebuilding the state and advancing its welfare. Protection of animals is considered a sacred duty. (Charak Sanhita)

All of this is an enormous source of concepts, principles, traditions and practices which is of great relevance to the study of the future of humanity and of the long-term perspectives which it is so essential to bring into the thought-frames of the present generation.” (Weeramantry. 2007.)
These messages from the books of Hindu religion are well recognized in the modern world. Society and forums like Alliance of Religion and conservation (ARC) discuss how these ideas give out a loud and clear message of conservation to the followers of Hinduism.
Figure 1: This picture a teachers teaching the doctrines of Hinduism it can be seen how close they were to nature (Source: Kalayan 1996).
Association of Various Hindu Gods and Goddesses with Elements of Nature

As we have discussed in the previous chapter how Hinduism's philosophy emphasizes about conservation. The Hindu religious and mythological books have tried to give a practical dimension to the concept of conservation by associating each element of nature with God. This can be seen even today. According to Bhalla, “what may seem just natural phenomena to most people is the will of God for Hindus.” (2006) They personify all planets like Sun, Moon, Saturn, Jupiter etc as Gods. These planets are not just considered important but they are worshipped in daily life. Hindu’s not only consider planets sacred but they also worship rivers, mountains, earth and fire. A well known example is Worship of the holy river Ganga.

According to Bhalla, the animal and plant world is a part of the evolutionary process for the modern scientist. But Hindus hold an altogether different perspective for both plants and animals. They consider most plants and animals sacred and also associated with Gods and Goddesses with them.

This can be very clearly seen if you ever visit any Hindu temple. You will find the first idol will be of Lord Ganesh - the Elephant God. The other important God in animal form is the Hanuman the monkey God (Plate III) there is description in the holy text of Ramayana about how Hanuman and his monkey army helped Lord Rama. The other animals too are worthy of their reverence. They are not just associated with different Gods and Goddesses but are considered equally important. It is well known that Hindus consider the cow as the most sacred of animals. Given below is a list of other animals which are associated with Gods and Goddesses

- Lord Shiva with the Bull as his vehicle
- Goddess Durga vehicle is a Lion or Tiger.
- Lord Vishnu’s vehicle is Garuda (an eagle)
• Lakshami’s vehicle is the Owl.
• Sri Ganesh Vehicle on a Mouse.
• Lord krishana with Cows
• Lord Vishnu with Sheshnaag the thousand headed snake. Bhalla P.P

According to Hindu mythology Lord Vishnu has ten incarnations among these first four are in the form of animals. The Matsya a fish, Kacchap a Tortoise, Varah a Boar Narsing half lion and half human. These incarnations are considered as Lord themselves leading to religious significance of theses animals as well. (Bhalla 2006)

Worshipping animals as God is a common practised among Hindus, but the worshipping of trees is also considered important. As discussed in the earlier paragraph how different Gods and Goddesses are associated with different animals the same way trees are also associated with them and worshipped.

It is a popular belief that cutting a green and fruiting tree is considered a sin and inauspicious. This act will make the tree God or Goddess angry and revengeful. For this reason, in ancient times, a list of trees which are associated with Gods and Goddesses in Hinduism are provided below:

• The holy basil –Tulsi (Ocimum Sanctum) is considered as the form of the Goddess Lakshmi and is very dear to Lord Vishnu.
• The Peepal tree (the tree around which this thesis focus) is considered as the incarnation of Lord Shiva (source Shiva purna) in skandpuran it says that Vishnu resides in the roots Brahma in trunk and all other Gods in leaves. and also to the Goddess Laksmi (on Sundays),
• Bel, rudraksa (seeds of Elaeccarpus) and ber (Zizyphus jujuba) are considered dear to Lord Siva,
• kadamba (Anthocephalus cadamba) to Lord Krishana; mango (Mangifera indica) to Lord Hanuman, Asoka to Kamadeva;

• coconut or sriphala (Cocos nucifera) to many Gods and Goddesses

• Neem is believed to be the abode of the Goddess Sitala

• Amala of both Lord Vishnu and Lord Siva,

• Lotus is very dear to all god and specially to goddess like Lakshami and Gaytari, sarswati who sit on this flower

• Bargad of Lord Siva’s matted hair which reflects in the tangled roots of the tree.

This list has been taken from Bharata and Kapoor.

As Gautum Chatterjee states precisely, the role of sacred trees, plants and their leaves stands foremost in the ritualistic life of Hindus they not only have religious importance but their medicinal value is discussed in the ancient text of Ayur Veda and is practised extensively even today. (1996)

Furthermore, a very important tree which needs to be mentioned here is the Parijat tree. It is considered as the wish granting and tree and there is a popular belief that this tree is unique. During my field visits we visited this tree. The legend about this tree is that it emerged during the churning of the ocean with other valuable things. It is believed that touching, circum-ambulating, worshipping it with water and flower and hugging it will grant all wishes and will keep away all bad luck and ill health. The government has taken several steps to protect this religiously valuable tree

There are numerous valuable plants and trees associated with various Gods and Goddess available in the literature of the Indian subcontinent but we can only discuss a few important ones due to the constraints of this thesis.
Figure 2: Lord Shiva in the form of Shivling and his bull in a temple.

Figure 3: Lord Ram with the Monkey-God, Hanuman.

Figure 4: Elephant God Ganesh with his vehicle, the mouse.

Figure 5: Lord Krishana with his cow.

Sheshnag(snake).

Figure 6: Lord Vishnu lying on Sheshnag(snake).
Figure 7: Goddess Durga sitting on her vehicle, lion.

Figure 8: Goddess Gayatri on a Lotus flower.
Figure 9: The Parijat tree.

Figure 10: People worshipping the Parijat Tree
Description of rituals performed with other trees and animals:

The previous chapters have given us a glimpse of Hinduism's relation with ecology and the environment. They also demonstrate how Hindus associate different elements of nature like the Sun, Moon, River, Mountains, Earth, Fire, plants and animals with different Gods and Goddesses. However, one of the most important aspects of Hinduism is the practice of rituals, and the belief that the performance of a set of fixed actions for all religious and spiritual ceremonies. This set of fixed actions performed at specific times, places or things is termed rituals.

In this chapter, we will focus on the rituals which are performed with and around different plants, animals and other elements of nature. Since India is a vast country with different beliefs, customs, traditions and rituals, it makes it difficult to talk about all of them. However, we will try to discuss some of the most important and widely accepted rituals. In order to understand the rituals, they have been divided into the following three categories:

- **Rituals dedicated to the elements of nature**:

  It has already been discussed in the previous chapters regarding how Hindus personify different planets and other elements of nature as Gods and Goddesses. Nevertheless, they also have special rituals for each of these elements which are performed on specific days of the year based on the Hindu (Lunar) calendar. Each day of the week is dedicated to one planet and that planet is worshipped on that particular day.

  **Sun God:** Sunday is dedicated to the Sun God – Surya. The sun is the life giving power for our planet and Hindus always heed its importance. A traditional Hindu will always get up early in the morning in order to worship the first rays of the Sun God. They thank the Sun God by offering a pot full of water and a red flower. Some people fast on a Sunday in order to get the blessings of the Sun God. In northern India a very special festival called *Chat Puja* is dedicated to the Sun God.
**Moon God:** Monday is considered as the day of the Moon. Some individuals fast on this day and worship the Moon God – Chandrama. There is a very famous and special festival associated with the moon, called **Karva Chauth.**

This festival is celebrated on the fourth day of the full Moon of the month of Karttika (around mid October). This festival is celebrated by married females who fast on this day and break their fast by offering prayers with water, flower and a light clay lamp. This day is also intimately linked with praying for the long life of their husbands. Another important festival is the Ahoi-asatami which is performed four days after Karva Chauth. It is similar to Karva Chauth and in this festival women worship the stars instead of the Moon and pray for the long life of their sons.

The other planets and the days on which special rituals are performed to them are listed below Mars–Mangal is associated with Tuesday, Mercury-Budh associated with Wednesday, Jupiter-Brihaspati associated with Thursday, Venus-Shukra with Friday, Saturn-Shani with Saturday . Depending on people’s beliefs different rituals are performed.

**Rivers:** Hindus consider rivers very sacred. There are many rituals performed with respect to different rivers and among the rivers, River Ganga is of prime importance. On a full moon day in the month of Karttika (mid October –mid November) people worship this river by taking a dip in the holy water. Later, they offer prayer to the Goddess Ganga by flowing lit clay lamps, flowers and other offering into the water. A similar kind of ritual is also performed on the tenth day after a moonless night in the Hindi month Jyaistha (mid May or early June), when people believe that worshipping the holy Ganga will wipe out all their sins and bring good luck.

**Rituals around animals:**

The association of Gods and Goddesses with different animals has been talked about previously. In the following section we will elaborate a little on some of the common rituals related to some of them.
The most important ritual concerned with animals is the everyday worship of Lord Ganesh (elephant God) and lord Hanuman (monkey God). People offer vermillion flowers, fruits, as well as a special sweet called Laddu, to these Gods and pray for blessings. Almost every Hindu home has a picture or idol of these two gods. People thus, consider the elephant and the monkey as sacred and try not to hurt or kill these animals. This is very strongly practised even today leading to the conservation of these animals.

Snake: The festival which is associated with the snake is called Nag Panchami (Nag- is the King Cobra). This festival falls on the fifth day after a moonless night in the Hindi month of savan (mid July-mid August). On this day, a picture of a snake is drawn at the entrance of the house. Flower, fruits, vermilion are offered to the picture of the Snake-God (Nag) and prayers are offered to it. These snakes in the wild are fed with milk. (Gangrad. 2006)

Cow: An important festival dedicated to the Cow is Gobar Dhan: Cow-dung (Gobar) and wealth (Dhan). Since, India is an agricultural country and it is well known that cow dung is one of the best organic manures, it can be concluded that cow dung will bring money. This festival is celebrated on the first day after the moonless night. On the day of the festival, a small painting of a cow-dung is drawn in the courtyard of the house. Following which water, flower, vermilion, rice flakes are offered to the painting. Finally, a story regarding this festival is narrated. (Gangrad. 2006)

There is another festival which falls sometime in September. This festival also involves cow and calf worship.

Rituals around trees and plants: The importance of trees in Hinduism has been mentioned in the previous chapters. Therefore this section will only deal with the importance in brief and will talk about some of the main rituals around sacred trees in detail. There are numerous rituals around many different trees found in different parts of India. Here we will only consider some extensively time-honoured ones.
According to Nugteren “An enormous Variety of ritualising is presently going on beneath and around trees in contemporary India, ranging from simple gestures of respect to elaborate rituals of selecting, propitiating, cutting, and carrying away the tree, as in traditional Vanayaga or forest sacrifice.” (2005) These rituals around trees have been categorised in many ways but for this discussion the name of the tree and ritual will be used.

**Banyan:** (Ficus bengalensis). “Like the Peepal Tree, the Banyan Tree also symbolizes the Trimurti-Lord Vishnu, Lord Shiva and Lord Brahma. The tree also symbolizes life and fertility in many Hindu cultures. That is the reason why the banyan tree is worshiped by those who are childless and this tree should never be cut. The tree can grow into a giant covering several hectares”. (*Religious products Sacred trees*)

**Vat savitari or Bargadi amavas** is the festival devoted to the great Banyan tree. This festival is celebrated on a moonless night (amavas) in the month of Jyaistha (mid May to mid June). On this day married females fast and visit the nearby Banyan tree (since it is a huge tree it is only found in public places) to offer water, vermilion, flowers rice, Bengal gram and jaggery and some food items to the tree. After that they take a white cotton thread and circum-ambulate the tree seven times, tying the thread to the tree. Later they take a leaf of the tree and tie it around their neck praying for long life of their husband and children. Often a small branch of the tree is brought home and worshipped. Some people also plant this tree as Bonsais in a pot and use that for this festival. Apart from the folk lore the value of this tree has been scientifically proved by A.B. Praba. She states that, “Three species namely Peepal, Neem and Bargad can tackle six different types of pollution.” In this same study it is mentioned that Banyan is a good absorber of pollutants like dust, noise and fly ash. (2002). Thus we could say that this ritual still practised with full enthusiasm both in modern and rural India spread a message of conserving this environmentally beneficial tree.

**Tulsi** (Ocimum sanctum or Holy Basil) “Tulsi is always associated with purity and a highly revered and used for all religious purposes among the Hindus. It is considered very
auspicious to have a Tulsi plant in the front courtyard of many Hindu households. Tulsi plants are also prized in Ayurveda, where they are considered an integral part of that sophisticated healing system. In practically every temple in India, no puja can be started without a few Tulsi leaves. There” (Source Religious products Sacred trees). From this information it is apparent how important Tulsi is for Hindus. Due to its great significance there are several rituals surrounding this shrub. One very widespread and significant ritual around Tulsi is maintaining a Tulsi plant in the courtyard. Watering it every morning and lighting a clay lamp under it in the evening is part of the daily practise in a traditional Hindu home. It is believed that doing this brings happiness and love in the family. Therefore, keeping this medicinal plant handy is considered good and auspicious.

One very prevalent ritual around Tulsi is celebrating its wedding (Tulsi vivha) with Lord Vishnu. This ritual is celebrated on the fist day of full moon in the Hindi month of Karttika (mid October to mid November). They also offer clothes, vermillion, flowers, bangles and sweats to the shrub and then light clay lamps under this shrub praying for happy life.

Amala: “The Indian gooseberry. Emblica officinalis) is a deciduous fond in India. It is known for its edible fruit of the same name. Indian gooseberry has undergone preliminary research, demonstrating antiviral and antimicrobial properties. It may be effective in curing disease such as for inflammation, cancer, age-related renal disease, and diabetes. (Wikipedia) It is one of the richest sources of Vitamin C it has the unique property that vitamin C present in this fruit does not get destroyed even after heating.

The festival dedicated to this medicinal tree is Amalka Ekadashi “Amla tree is worshipped. It is believed that God resides in this tree. This day is observed on the eleventh day of the waxing moon of Phalgun. After the morning ablutions, Amala tree is ceremonially bathed and watered, and then worshipped. (Source zeenews.com fast and festivals) The above mentioned rituals are only the ones which have been observed by us and are
extensively practised even in this modern era. Information regarding some of these has also been gathered during the interviews. These are just a small part of the big list. Given that are various others which have been listed below in a tabular form this table has been taken from the work of P. Bharata. and S. Kapoor.

Table in Figure 11 sheds light on the fact that Hinduism is one of the oldest surviving religions in the world and that it has a strong connection with ecology and environment. The ancient texts also confirm that Hinduism's philosophy considers ecological and environmental conservation as an integral part of daily life. The association of different plants, animals and elements of nature with different Gods and Goddesses shows how close this religion is to ecology. The festivals related to animals, plants and elements of nature are a form of remembering that they are essential for maintaining the balance of life on earth. These rituals are a symbol of offering gratitude to the wonders of nature. The widespread belief and practising of the rituals in today's world of technology and globalization is a good example of linking traditional approaches to modern ones.
### Figure 11: Table Showing rituals related to trees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Tree</th>
<th>Related or Vrata</th>
<th>Festival</th>
<th>Time of Celebration and Rituals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amala</td>
<td>Amala Ekadasi</td>
<td></td>
<td>11th day of Phalguna sukla; bath with water soaked in amala fruit; eating it; worshipping it; and worship of Radha-Krsna.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amra or Mango</td>
<td>Amra-puspa Bhaksana Vrata</td>
<td></td>
<td>1st day of Caitra sukla; eating of mango blossoms and worship of Kamadeva.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asoka</td>
<td>Asoka Pratipada</td>
<td></td>
<td>1st day of Caitra sukla; only women worship the Tree; they also observe fast seeking longevity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakula</td>
<td>Bakula Amavasya</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bakula flowers are offered to the manes, seeking Their blessings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vata or Bargad</td>
<td>Vata Savitri Vrata</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jyestha purimina or amavasya day; having fasted for three previous days, married women worship the bargad tree by circumambulating, tying with the sacred protective thread (raksa sutra), and listening to the sacred Savitri-Satyavan story; some women stay awake during the night and complete the vow feeding a brahmin; in western parts of India, devout women observe this vow for five consecutive years after marriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilva or Bel</td>
<td>Bilva Tri-ratri Vrata</td>
<td></td>
<td>On a Tuesday of Jyestha purimina when the cons- tellation is Jyestha; worship of the bel tree for three consecutive nights as per Hemadri’s injunctions in the Skanda Purana; the vow compr- ises bath with water mixed with mustard seeds, partaking of sacred sattvic food (havisyanna), adorning the tree with two pieces of red cloth and placing the image of Uma-Mahesvara beneath it; homa is performed and 1,008 bilva leaves are offered; brahmims are fed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karavira or Kaner or Oleander (Neriumindicum)</td>
<td>Karavira Vrata</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jyestha sukla prathama tithi; kaner roots and branches are bathed and adorned with red cloth; offerings of seven cereals (sapta dhanya) and fruit are made followed by fasting; Savitri, Satyabhama, and others performed this when they were in trouble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadali or Kela</td>
<td>Kadali Vrata</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vaisakha, Magha or Kartika sukla caturdasi; a banana tree is planted and nurtured till it bears fruit; wishing the welfare of one’s family, a person should worship the tree with flowers, fruit, etc and circumambulate it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadali or Kela</td>
<td>Yaks-samantaka Kadali Vrata</td>
<td></td>
<td>A golden banana tree is worshipped and offered to a brahmin on any auspicious day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevada or Screw Pine (Panadanusodoratisimus)</td>
<td>Kevada Teej</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bhadra sukla trtiya; soliciting unbroken married life, women offer Kevada leaves to Lord Siva.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neem</td>
<td>Sitala Puja</td>
<td></td>
<td>Caitra navaratras; goddess Sitala who is said to reside in the neem tree is propitiated ritually; Pat Gosain festival in Bengal means neem tree worship; neem leaves are eaten on Vaisakha sukla saptami.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 12: Nine planets personify as humans.

Figure 13: Women worshipping the Moon on karva chauth.

Figure 14: Cow dung worship.
Figure 15: Snake worship on Nag Panchami.

Figure 16: Worship of bonsai Bargad tree. Figure 17: Worship of Tulsi tree.
The sacred groves: A link between religious rituals and conservation
The planet is undergoing its most severe ecological crisis in the history of human civilization. We are on the verge of losing some very important plant and animal species. The ecological balance created by the earth is being destroyed by us very quickly. The carrying capacity of the earth is fast reaching its limit.

The present situation is causing us to look back into history and learn ways of sustainable living. An important aspect of this is to find rescue in religion. Initially several researchers blamed religions practices for the promotion of the present ecological crisis. White in 1967 advocated that Judeo-Christian ideology (into which he grouped Islam and Marxism) portrays nature’s (environment) prime role was to serve the mankind. This may be true to some extent for other religions of the world. As stated by Dwivedi (1990) “…how it is that this religions ,which taught harmony with and respect for nature ,and which influenced other religions such as Jainism and Buddhism, has been in resent times unable to sustain a caring attitude towards nature.” So we may say that sometimes the followers of religions lack understanding of the principle of the religions leading to such problems.

If you look more carefully and try to understand the doctrines of various religions it is evident that almost all religions promote the concept of maintaining an ecological balance and encourage a respect for the elements of nature. Various religions depict the worship of elements of nature, like fire, earth, sun etc as gods and goddesses. Among them the prime religions considered close to nature are Buddhism, Jainism, Shintoism and Hinduism to name a few.

Dwivedi argues that religion can directly and/or indirectly act as a powerful source of environment conservation. He suggests that although religions are unable to sustain a caring attitude towards nature completely in the present time of ecological crises yet, “[Religion] can evoke a kind of awareness in person that is different from
scientific or technological reasoning.” (1990) A major breakthrough in this respect was the formation of the Alliance for religion and Conservation (ARC) by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in 1986. The main aim of this organization is to show that “religions need to be, and increasingly are, in partnership with the environmental and development movements in order to make this world a better place for all life.” (Palmer and Finlay, 2003)

Hinduism is one of the oldest and the third largest surviving religion in the world. It is considered very close to nature because its ancient texts and major doctrines revolve around maintaining harmony with nature and ecological cycles. It promotes worship of all elements of nature, like sun, moon, earth, sky, planets, rivers, mountains, animals and trees. This thesis focuses on the role religious rituals of Hinduism play in biodiversity conservation with special emphasis on rituals around trees. This is very vast and there are a huge number of rituals concerned with trees so rituals related to Peepal tree (ficus religosa) will be used as the specific example.

An important dimension of all ancient religions is the presence of rituals and taboos. Their role in the conservation of environment was ignored from centuries but today several studies in this field illustrate that these rituals and “Taboos frequently guide human conduct towards the natural environment” (Colding and Folke 2005).

The practice of rituals related to the objects of nature like the sun, moon, animals and plants can be dated to very early stages of civilization. Among these, tree worship holds a special place. It has been documented in India during the hunting and gathering age (circa 600 A.D. cited by Chandrakanth et al 1990).

A significant link between tree worship and environmental conservation is the presence of sacred groves. Sacred groves have been studied for a long time as described by Pandey “Even though we have few studies, sacred groves in particular,
however, are among the most researched areas. Dietrich Brandis, as early as 1887, gave initial information on sacred groves of Aravallis.” Sacred Grove is the “Protection of small forest patches by dedicating them to the local deity” (Khumbongmaym et al. 2004). One important sacred grove in history and religion is the forest of Joseph Smith's First Vision. This forest has been referred as the ‘Sacred Grove’ since 1906. Today sacred groves have been found and studied in Africa, Europe, Australia, and America. Apart from India there presence is reported in Ghana, Syria, Nigeria, Turkey and Japan.

Several authors, as discussed below, have shown that sacred groves are a group of trees dedicated to the local deity by indigenous people. These indigenous people hold certain taboos about and rituals in and around these sacred groves which help in conservation of biodiversity. Khumbongmaym et al believe that “Dedicating a patch of forestland to deities is a common practice with the Meitei community of Manipur. This practise assumes great significance in biodiversity conservation.” They also state that sacred plants have either medical or religious importance and are associated with cultural practices and beliefs as well as taboos.

“Berkes et al. (1995) describe social restraints, such as taboos, that lead to indigenous biological conservation. These restraints include providing total protection to some biological communities, habitat patches, and certain selected species, as well as protection of other species during critical stages of their life history” (Colding and Folke, 1997). They claim that religious rituals, cultural practices and taboos act as tools for protection and conservation of rare and vulnerable species listed as threatened in IUCN red data book.
Anthwal et al reported that, “Indigenous cultural and rituals practices of the local people in sacred groves serve as a tool for conserving biodiversity. Sacred groves are distributed over a wide ecosystem and help in conservation of rare and endemic species. Various indigenous communities all over the world lived in harmony with nature and thus conserved biodiversity.” (2006)

Thus, it can be said that researchers in the field agreed that religious rituals observed by the indigenous communities played an important role in the conservation of biodiversity.

Authors like Nugteren in his book Belief, Bounty and Beauty discuss the popular rituals around trees in India and also talk about the rituals around the Bodhi tree (Ficus religiosa) (2005). Another author, Chatterjee, demonstrated the religious and mythological importance of Ficus religiosa and describes the rituals around this tree. His discussion is only limited to the description of the rituals and does not consider how they have been perceived by practitioners. (2003)

Nevertheless only a few authors have studied and documented the role of religious rituals practised by Non indigenous people as put by Cocks and Dold, “To date this concept has been used only in reference to ‘Indigenous People’ who, as part of their traditional lifestyles, use biodiversity to sustain their cultural identity”.

It is worthwhile to point out that to the best of my knowledge no study focusing on the role of common people and their ritual practices in conservation of Biodiversity has been reported. The main aim of this work is to find out how the common man, who is part of the globalizing world, perceives and participates in the rituals which, may play an important role in the conservation of biodiversity.
Figure 18: A sacred garden (Source: Pandey).
The Peepal Tree: 
Religious and 
Ritualistic Importance
The Peepal tree

For this thesis the specific example of rituals around the Peepal tree are used. This tree is used because it is one of the most sacred tree found in the Indian subcontinent, it is a sacred tree for both Hindus and Buddhists. This tree is called by many names in different languages for example in English it is commonly referred to as the Sacred Fig or Holy Fig, Sanskrit and Bengali Asvatha, Hindi Marathi and Punjabi –Peepal or Pipal, Gujarati- Piplo, Oriya –Mui Chatka.Telgu – Pippali in Kanareses- Arali , Malayalam- Aryal it is also called Bodhi or Bo tree.(Chatterjee 2003)

The botanical name of the tree is Ficus Religiosa. The botanical classification of the tree is in the family Moraceae (Mulberry family) under the Magnoliophyta division, class Agnoliopsida, order Urticales. Some authors suppose that these names are also related to the sacredness of the tree, like the botanical name of the tree is Ficus religosa, ‘Ficus’ is the Latin word for ‘Fig’, the fruit of the tree, and 'Religiosa' refers to 'religion'. This can said because the tree is sacred for both Hinduism and Buddhism. It is very frequently planted in temples and shrines of both faiths. Another name for it is, 'Bodhi' or its short form 'Bo' which means 'supreme knowledge' or 'awakening' in the old Indian languages. The term, 'Peepal', has ancient roots which gives rise to English words like 'Pip' and 'Apple', which mean possibly means, 'fruit-bearing tree'. The terms, 'Ashwattha' and 'Ashvattha' come from an ancient Indian root word - "Shwa" - which means 'morning' or 'tomorrow'. (The Tree .org.uk)

This is a huge deciduous tree with dense foliage, strong and thick trunk and wide spreading branches. The trunk is covered with grey bark; the leaves are about 12-18 cm long. The leaves of the tree are Reddish pink when new but later they turn into
deep green colour. The leaves are heart shaped with a tail like pointed tip making them very attractive. It bears red flowers which appear in February followed by small flat topped figs like fruits in May/June.

**The Habitat:** This tree is native Indian sub continent tree found all over India, Nepal and some part of Shri Lanka.

**Medicinal value:** The medicinal value of this tree is extensively discussed in the ancient medical text of Ayurveda. All parts of the tree are used as a medicine and suppose to have cooling effect and cure many diseases of blood, vagina, uterus, leucorrhoea, burning sensation, biliousness, and ulcers. Different parts like bark, leaves, root and fruit can be used for the therapeutic value they help in killing bacterial activity. This is also used for inflammations, swellings of neck, ulcers, skin diseases and scabies. It also helps to stop hiccups, nausea etc. The bark is externally applied in cases of eczema, leprosy and rheumatism. Roots are said to be good for gout and prevent gum disease. Fruits act as laxative, promotes digestion and checks vomiting. Ripe fruits can also be used for the treatment of snake bite and heart disease. Powdered fruit is good for asthma Seeds are used in urinary troubles. Leaves are applied to glands in mumps and also as a tonic for females. The leaves and bark together are considered helpful in relieving diarrhoea, dysentery, bleeding and constipation. It is believed that licking honey placed on peepal leaves may cure speech irregularities. (Source: *the tree.org.uk, and Oudhia 2003*)

**Other uses:** Different parts of this tree are used for several purposes like “The latex is used as a sealing wax and to mend pottery, bark fibres have been used in Myanmar to make Paper” *Bremness* (1994) The twigs and leaves act as fodder for cattle’s and elephants. There is description in some text that in ancient times boats
were made from wood of this tree. The bark and leaves are also used for religious ceremonies. (Source; the Majestic Evergreen Tree)

**Environmental Importance of Peepal:** A variety of studies have confirmed that this tree is one of the most environmentally beneficial tree found in the India sub continent .Its relevance to the environment has been discussed in many ancient texts of Hinduism. For instance, as stated by Oudhia “the air purification properties of Peepal tree are also mentioned in ancient Indian literatures. The natives and traditional healers of Chhattisgarh are aware of this fact since generations. This is the reason that the natives preferably plant this herb in home gardens” (2003)

In an article by Zhu (2005), “One of the most important measures to counter pollution is planting trees. With neem and peepal being the largest emitters of oxygen, planting them in the gardens purifies the surrounding air and helps in maintaining hygienic conditions.”

A study conducted in Delhi by Prabha(2002) states that “Three species namely Peepal, Neem and Bargad can tackle six different types of pollution”. In this same article a table titled “List of plants found in sanctified green areas of Delhi and suitable abatement of different types of pollution” It reports that the Peepal tree is a good absorber of pollutants like dust, gaseous particulate matter, cyclonic winds, noise, fly ash and carbon dioxide.

*Bhalla* states that “The Peepal Tree converts carbon dioxide into oxygen round the clock” (2002)

These researches are an indication about the environmental importance of this religious tree and also give us a clue about the reasons for worshipping and considering this tree holy.
The religious importance of Peepal tree in Hinduism and Buddhism

The Peepal tree is considered very sacred and has special significance for the Hindus. Some of the important texts of Hinduism like Brahmvaivartpuran, Tattriya Samhita and Padampuran discuss about the importance of Peepal tree. In Sakandpuran it says that Lord Vishnu resides in the roots, trunk and branches and all other Gods and Goddesses in the leaves of the tree. Given below are some important associations.

Association with Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva): There are several anecdote related to the association of Peepal tree with the three main deities of Hinduism some major ones are listed below.

According to Venugopalan (2003) “Peepal is the most revered tree because as per the scriptures the root of the tree represents Lord Brahma (creator), the trunk represents Lord Vishnu (the Preserver) and the leaves represent Lord Shiva (the destroyer). Thus Worshipping a Peepal is an equivalent to worshipping all the three Mahadevas together.” In the Holy Text of The Bhagvad Gita Lord Krishana says “Ashvattha of all tree” Thereby meaning I am Ashvattha (another name of Peepal) among trees. This suggests that the peepal tree is associated with lord Krishana.

Some believe that this tree is an incarnation of Lord Shiva a popular legend states that Shiva was born as Son to the wife of Dadhachi (a Saint), who sacrificed his life by giving away his bones to Gods for making weapons. Hearing this, the pregnant wife of Dadhachi decided to end her life. However on the advice of the Gods she decided to die after giving birth to the child. For this purpose she sat under a peepal tree and died after delivering the child (who was an incarnation of lord Shiva). This child was taken care by the Peepal tree hence he was called Peepalad meaning peepal god. When he grew up Peepalad enquired about his father’s and mother’s death. He
was told that they both died because of the bad influence of Shani graha (planet Saturn). Hearing this, news Peepalad was angry and he cursed Shani (planet Saturn) making him fall down from the solar system. Troubled Shani asked for forgiveness to Peepalad. Consequently, Peepalad said that if someone worships the peepal tree on Saturday all the pain of Shani will go away and the person doing so will get blessings of both Shani and Lord Shiva. This is why Peepal is considered as incarnation of Shiva, it is also linked with Shani. (Shiv Puran cited in Kalayan 1998)

In another story once all the gods decided to visit Shiva, but Narad informed them that it was an inappropriate time for a visit as Shiva and Parvati were in solitude but Indra did not heed the advice of Narad. Consequently Nard reported Indra’s arrogance to goddess parfait. She cursed the gods that they, along with their wives, would turn into trees. When the gods asked for forgiveness, she promised that as trees they would attain fame. Thus Indra turned into a mango tree, Brahma became a palash tree and Vishnu turned into a peepal tree. (The Majestic Evergreen Tree)

**Association with Shani:** According to Dubey “Shani Grah is supposed to reside in the roots of peepal (Ficus religiosa)” 1996. Another Popular legend in this regards is from Brahm Purana, it says that there were two demons namely Ashvattha and peepala they both harassed people Ashvatta would take the form of Peepala and Peepala the form of Brahmin. This fake Brahmin would advise people to touch the tree and as soon as people did this they were killed. Later Lord Shani destroyed both these demons. That is why it is considered safe to touch Peepal on a Saturday. (Source: Peepal tree)

**Association with Lakshami (goddess of wealth):** At the time of sea’s churning, Goddess Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth) had emerged from the sea. Her counterpart Alakshmi also emerged with her. Alakshmi symbolized penury and hence, there was
no taker for her. She begged Lord Vishnu to take her with Him. But Lakshmi was not ready to share Lord Vishnu with her so she protested. Hence Lord Vishnu ordered Alakshmi to take an abode on Peepal tree. Since then, Alakshmi lives there. If an unwary devotee forgets to tie a thread around Peepal’s trunk, Alakshmi comes to ride him or her causing great poverty. That is why custom of tying a thread around Peepal’s trunk after watering it came into practice. On Saturday Goddess Lakshami comes to visit her sister therefore it is considered good to worship this tree on a Saturday. (Source: blog archive). According to another popular belief peepal tree is also supposed to be the abode of lord yama (god of death).

**Buddhism**

The Peepal tree is also considered very sacred by the Buddhist. It is believed that Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree (Ficus religiosa or peepal) at Uruvela on Vaisakha Poornima, the full moon day in April-May month. After that he is said to have stayed for 7 weeks meditating and mastering all his senses, whilst staying under the Bodhi tree as well as some other trees. According to Nugteren (2005) “The official representative of Buddhism is the eight spolked wheel of Dhama, but the bodhi tree (or bodhi leaf) is one of the three major representations of Buddhism together with the Buddha himself and his footprints.

**Rituals around Bodhi tree in Buddhism:** Buddhist monk consider Bodhi tree (Ficus religiosa or peepal) as Buddha himself and Thus it is one of the main items of the daily ritual at the Anuradhapura Bodhi-tree (and at many other places) is the offering of alms as if unto the Buddha himself. A special ritual held annually at the shrine of the Anuradhapura tree is the hanging of gold ornaments on the tree. Pious devotees offer valuables, money, and various other articles during the performance of this ritual. (Source: The Tree.org.uk)
Rituals, Customs and Folklore Related to Peepal Tree

The rituals around Peepal tree are a very common phenomenon and an integral part of Hinduism but as already discussed this tree is regarded very sacred not only to the Hindus but also to Buddhist. This particular tree has religious as well as ritualistic importance not only in India, but also as in other countries of the Indian subcontinent, especially Nepal and Shri Lanka. Rituals and beliefs related to this tree are numerous and to cover all of them is beyond the scope of this thesis. So here we will discuss only some of the most important rituals and folk lore connected with it.

The worship of this tree on a Saturday:

As noted above this tree has a special link with the planet Saturn (Shani) and during the field visit we saw that this tree is worshipped especially on a Saturday because this is the day of Saturn. Usually all the temple dedicated to Shani (Saturn) have a Peepal tree near them. A huge crowd emerges in the Shani temple on a Saturday to worship both Lord Shani and the Peepal. On a Saturday morning the worshipper offers water in the roots of the tree, while some people also put milk and then they light incense stick, offer flowers and vermillion to the tree. In the evening a lamp with mustard or sesame oil is lit under the tree. This is done in order to please Lord Shani, who may have ill effect on the birth chart of the people. This ritual is supposed to neutralize the ill effects of Shani. (kalayan 1998)

Worshiping this tree on a Monday: The peepal is associated with Lord Shiva and Monday is considered the day of Shiva. People worship this day by offering water mixed with milk ,some sweets etc then circum-ambulate the tree several times .This
is believed to earn the blessings of the lord Shiva. Lighting a lamp under the tree everyday in the evening specially on a Saturday or Monday is considered to free one from all kinds of sins.

**Ritual related to Death:** Offerings made at its roots are believed to reach the God of Death. In Rajasthan, if a man dies, his son pours 300 buckets of water at the root of a peepal tree and circumambulates it five times, so that his father's soul would rest in peace. In Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, water, milk and sesame seeds are offered to ancestors in an earthen pot hung on the peepal tree. A lamp is lit under the tree for thirteen days. (The Majestic Evergreen Tree)

**Rituals to get away from the ill effects of horoscope:** In north India if a girl's horoscope predicts widowhood, she is first married to a peepal tree on an auspicious date. In olden days, when remarriage was forbidden for girls, young widows were married to the peepal tree and then allowed to remarry. (Source: The Majestic Evergreen Tree)

**Rituals related to fertility:** The *ashwattha* symbolises the continuity of life because the tree itself lives and grows for hundreds of years. Childless couples devoutly believe in its powers. They worship it by tying threads of white, red and yellow silk around it to pray for progeny and rewarding parenthood. Women circumambulate the peepal tree to be blessed with children or to gain a desired thing or person. "Watering the *bodhi* tree enhances another aspect of its magic: the power of fertility. Villagers come to the bodhi tree observes Godakumbura and having made due observances, pray for a male child, thus continuing the original fertility image. A peepal tree is planted to the east of the house or temple. Eight, eleven or twelve years
after the tree has been planted, the upanayan ceremony is performed for the tree. A round platform is constructed around the tree. Different gods like ashwattha, narayan, vasudev, rukmini, satyabhama are invoked and worshipped. All the rituals of the upanayan ceremony are performed, and then the tree is married to the basil plant.”

(source: The Majestic Evergreen Tree)

**Marriage of trees:** On Amavasya, villagers perform a symbolic marriage between the neem and the peepal, which are usually grown near each other. Although this practice is not prescribed by any religious text, there are various beliefs on the significance of 'marrying' these trees. In one such belief, the fruit of the neem represents the Shivalinga and so, the male. The leaf of the peepal represents the yoni, the power of the female. The fruit of the neem is placed on a peepal leaf to depict the Shivalinga, which symbolises creation through sexual union, and so the two trees are 'married'. After the ceremony, villagers circle the trees to get rid themselves of their sins. (Source: Peepal Tree)

**Ritual for Wealth:** In Tamil nadu, peepal and neem trees are planted so close to each other that they mix up as they grow. An idol of Snake is placed under them and worshipped. This is believed to bless the worshipper with wealth. Women take an early morning bath and circum-ambulate these trees.

**The traditional ritual of Somvati amavas:** This ritual is the most common and well known rituals one performed around Peepal in North India. This ceremony is performed whenever a Monday fall on the no moon day, which may happen several times in a year or only once or twice a year, but a similar ritual is performed each time. This festival is considered traditional and is carried forward from one generation
to the next. The important thing about the festival is that it is performed by females only. Mostly married females participate in this. On this day they fasting since morning and later these ladies group visit the nearest Peepal tree in a group. There they start the ritual by make small Idol of male and female with the help of rice flour dough and stick it on the trunk of the tree. This is followed by the offering of some vermillion, rice, flowers and water. Soon after this the ladies start to circum-ambulate around the tree and depending on their faith women go around 14 times and some go around 108 times. After each circle either some dry fruit or a grain is dropped near the tree. Then a white thread is tied while making circles and the following story is narrated.

Once upon a time there was girl whose horoscope predicted that she cannot get married. Her Parents were very sad. They decided to ask the priest what should be done regarding it. The Priest suggested that if this girl does all the work of washerwomen for twelve years without the knowledge of the washerwomen and on the last day asks the washerwomen to give vermillion to her, then everything will be all right. The girl did as advised by the priest for twelve years. On the last day she added sugar in the food instead of salt so the washerwomen asked her daughter in laws who made that food. The daughter in laws replied that they have not done any household chores from the last twelve years. Then the mother in law was surprised and wanted to find out who is doing all this work for her. That night the washerwomen did not sleep and decided to find out who does all her work. In the middle of the night when the girls came to do the work the washerwomen caught her, asked her who is she what she wanted. The girl narrated everything about the priest’s advice and invited the washerwomen to come to her wedding and requested to give vermillion to her. The washerwomen agreed to do so. At the time of wedding when
washer women gave vermillion to the girl red scarf of the washerwomen turned black and the scarf of the girl turned red. This indicated that the husband of the washerwomen died. She was sad worried but decided to go back home on the way back home she saw some female goats circum-ambulating a Peepal tree, then female camel doing the same later she saw some ladies circum-ambulating around a Peepal tree. So she became curious and decided to ask the ladies. The Ladies told them that they are worshipping the Peepal tree for long life of their husband hearing this she also thought of worshipping the tree and circum-ambulated it 108 times. As soon as she did this her black scarf started turning red again and her husband was alive again. That is why ladies consider this festival auspicious and worship the tree for long life of there husbands.

Thus, we could say that the Peepal tree is one of the most important trees in Hinduism and Buddhism. It has a very high religious importance along with medicinal and environmental importance leading to its presence in lots of rituals and appears in various folklores.
Figure 19: Two giant peepal trees.

Figure 20: Young Peepal tree grown on the wall shows leaves structure.

Figure 21: A female performing weakly ritual (urban area).
Figure 22: Females performing the traditional ritual of Somvati amavas in the semi urban area of Bakshi ka Talab.

Figure 23: Female worshipping a people tree on a road side (semi urban).
Methodology
Methodology

This study aims to find out the role of religious rituals practised by common man in biodiversity conservation. The sample for this study is selected from: Lucknow (a north Indian city), two villages approximately 50-60 km away from the city and two towns which fall between these cities and villages. These three locations were selected as representative of urban area – Lucknow; the two small towns namely Barabanki and Bakshi ka Talaab represent semi urban areas and two villages - Kintoor and Deoari – representing the rural areas.

The main reason for selection of this part of India was the familiarity with the local language and cultural beliefs. India is a vast country with many different languages and beliefs and since this work is based on the qualitative data collected about rituals through interviews, familiarity with the language and culture was very important in order to complete the research in the limited time available.

This particular city was selected firstly because the city of Lucknow which is the capital of India’s largest state Uttar Pradesh. It is among one of the major cites of North India with an urban area of 359.51 Sq. Km and a population of 2,266,933 (2001-03-01, source GeoHive). Secondly, this city is visibly undergoing cultural transitions due to the effects of modernization. It is considered on the verge of attaining the status of a Metro city, thus, this is a good time to observe how its people perceive rituals in this state of transition. Two small towns, namely Barabanki and Baskshi ka Talaab, and two villages on the same route were selected to see if there is any difference in the type of rituals due to change in place of dwelling and if there is any change then what is the nature of these changes. The main reasons for the selection of these particular villages and towns was distance and time, because rituals
mainly fall on the same day and these places are well connected by road so both could studied on the same day.

The rituals which are associated with the Peepal tree (*Ficus religious*) were selected because of the religious, ritualistic, environmental and mythological importance of this particular tree, discussed in detail in a separate sub chapter of this thesis. Secondly, the time allotted for fieldwork matched with the rituals concerned with this tree.

**Sample selection:** The selection of sample was based on the technique of random sampling. This sampling technique was used because our target group was people who had come to worship the Peepal tree at a particular time and location i.e. either on a specific day of the week or on a special festival like, *Somvati amavas*. The location of the tree was either within a temple or the tree was found by the roadside where there were a large number of people present at that particular time. Hence we spoke to a group of approximately 5-8 people and selected 2 of them based on their willingness to share their views. During the weekly ritual it was a mixed sample of males and females of different age groups. However, the sample mainly consisted of females above the age of 20 at the time of the actual practice of the traditional ritual because it is mainly celebrated by females who are already married. Another sample consisted of astrologers and priests who were consulted by our primary respondents.

The group of people we spoke to, primarily, acted as participants of the focus group and discussions with them helped us to identify our key informants and respondents. For this purpose we visited about 6 temples in the urban area and 6 temples in each of the rural and semi urban area, and some 20 trees on the roadside altogether. The tree on the roadside were selected based on the religious activity, that
is, if there were signs of religious activity present, like, tying of cloth, presence of
idols of gods and goddesses or some stones which represent gods etc.

After the selection of the sample in-depth interviews were carried out with the
respondents. These interviews were mainly based on the semi-structured
questionnaires which consisted of questions, like, “Since when are you performing
this ritual?”, “What do you do during the rituals?”, “Why do you perform this ritual?”,
“Will you cut this tree for any purpose?”, “Are you aware about the environmental
importance of the tree?” etc. This questionnaire was not distributed among
respondents but was used instead to facilitate the interviewer in his interaction with
the respondents.

Semi-structured interviews were the best method for collecting the information,
which required detailed narrations with regards to the process and stories etc (note : a
copy of the questionnaire is attached in the appendix).

The second main technique used was that of observation. It is an important tool in
any sociological and anthropological research because it helps reveal information
which cannot be expressed in words. For this study observation was extremely
important because rituals involve lots of action which are difficult to describe in
words but play a useful role for the study. Two kinds of observation techniques, i.e.
Participant and Non-Participant, were used to observe how people performed the
ritual. Aspects of the ritual gathered through observing the ritual which helped the
researchers were, for example, the kind articles and objects used during the ritual,
time spent in the performance of the ritual, and the kinds of hymns chanted during the
performance of the ritual.
Photographs: This is a very important technique used because it explains much more than words alone. Secondly it is a proof of our activities and adds to the authenticity of the data collected.

Data analysis: The data which was collected during the interviews was recorded with the help of a recorder and it was documented in written form (note: some of the interviews are attached in the appendix). This data was then analysed with the help of parameters like the number of people who responded positively or negatively to any question, the age of the people, type of ritual practises in each area, the reasons of practising the rituals etc. This was then represented in graphical form using Microsoft excel. Thereafter, the results and discussion was based on this analysis.

The sociological and anthropological analysis forms the bulk of the work of this thesis. This is done through correlation of field data with textual analysis of sacred texts of Hindu religion and ritual practise as prescribed in the mass media.

The Hindu religious text forms the core of theoretical and philosophical framework, while the masse media and globalisation are taken as agents of change. The data is analysed against these markers to consider indexes for continuity and change.

Limitations: There were several limitations which were faced during the above mentioned process. The first and the foremost was the time duration. This was particularly limiting in this case because the rituals fall after a certain period of time and on specific dates. Hence, it was not possible to observe all the important rituals which fall at different times in the year. It was also difficult to travel from one place to another i.e. from Urban, semi urban and rural in one day due to time constraints and traffic. The lack of time also resulted in the size of the sample selected for this project. Secondly, the presence of a large number of trees and temples made it
difficult to choose and restrict the number of trees included in the sample size. Subsequently, we focused on the most prominent trees which made up the sample. Thirdly, due to financial and time constraints, travel to other parts of India in order to observe the differences in the rituals had to be restricted. Some people were not at all willing to talk to us and this also one of the major limitations during the selection of the sample.

It is very important to note that as this is a Master’s programme thesis and the time required to collect the data and write the thesis severely constrained the size of the data set. But the anthropological methods of in-depth interview and participatory observations when combined with textual analysis help to illustrate basic trends despite relatively small data set.
Figure 24: Map of India showing Lucknow (urban area).
Figure 25: Map showing all the three locations in which field work was conducted.
Figure 26: Focus group discussion in semi urban area.

Figure 27: Participant observation.
Results and Discussion
Results

This study aims to find out 1. To what extent do ritual practises of common man (non indigenous) contribute in the conservation of certain species, 2. What is the difference in the rituals in three different dwelling places namely: urban, semi urban and rural, 3. what are the reasons for this change?

During the field investigation several questions were asked by the interviewer and based on the answers, the following conclusions were drawn:

- **There is conservation of the peepal tree due to the ritualistic and religious importance of it.**

![Percentage representation of number of people saying they do not cut Peepal tree](image)

**Figure: 28 Percentage representation of number of people who do not cut Peepal tree**

Note: sample size used for preparation of this chart is 60 people

The above graph depicts that during the interviews, 92% of the people said that “Peepal ko koi Hindu nahi katatha” (“no Hindu will ever cut down a peepal tree”). Among the reasons give, some people said, “is per sab devata rehate hain is liya nahi katha” (“all Gods resides on it so we do not cut this tree”) which is represented by the blue colour in the pie chart. The remaining 8% of the people said that only if unavoidable circumstances prevail they may think of cutting down the tree. When the
people were asked whether they would like to cut down a peepal tree, for any specific purpose, like for fire wood or if it hinders them in the construction of their house, or commercial establishments like their shop or office etc, nearly all of them replied that they would try not to cut down the tree unless they are left with no other choice. The field observation also supports this information. Some said that cutting a peepal tree is very inauspicious because evil spirits resided on the tree and for the reasons mentioned above. They believed that only non-Hindus could dare to cut the peepal tree. A number of people, especially in the rural and semi urban areas, said that, if they cut down a peepal tree then the evil sprits (Brahm Baba) will trouble them. A number of respondents told us that once a man urinated under a peepal tree by mistake, following which, the evil sprit residing on the tree caused him to fall sick and he was mentally disturbed. Later, on the advice of a priest, he worshiped the peepal tree and asked for forgiveness, only after that he recovered from his illness. Another very interesting tale about a village where by mistake a peepal tree was burnt came to light during the focus group discussion. In this tale the discussants told us that soon after the peepal tree was burnt there were several incidents of fire in the village and each house of the village suffered some kind of mishap due to fire. This continued until the villagers prayed to the peepal tree for forgiveness. The villagers believed that since the peepal tree was burnt and the Gods residing in it got angry, the villagers suffered from the anger of the Gods. Other narrations have also come to light that indicate that there was also a strong aspect of fear prevalent among people towards cutting the tree which led to its protection and conservation.

In another location, a giant peepal tree (located on the road in front of a house in semi urban area) which was almost blocking the entrance of the house was noticed. Thus, to enquire about the tree from a girl who inhabited the house seemed essential.
We asked her whether they would like to cut this tree down because it was blocking the entrance of the house. The girl replied that, her father once thought of cutting it down but the priest of the area suggested him not to do so. She also told us that the priest advised her father that if he really needs to cut the tree down then he should perform a ceremony asking forgiveness from the tree first and should give away all the money obtained from selling the wood to charity without using a penny for his personal gain.

During the focus group discussion a local priest told us the story about a giant ancient peepal tree situated on the runway of an Air-force station (near Bakshi ka Talab on the highway from Lucknow to Sitapur). A popular story among the inhabitants of the area reports that once during the British rule in India, a British officer ordered the cutting down of the peepal tree because it obstructed the runway, but soon after he gave the order, the officer met with a plane crash and died on the spot. Later some other officials also tried to cut the tree and met with various disasters. Since then no one has ever tried to harm this tree which still exists on the runway. There is a small temple located under the tree which is worshipped by the Air force officers.

The conservation of the peepal tree is noticeable even in modern cities and localities. During our field visits we noticed in several places that even when a huge peepal tree is obstructing either the entrance of a shop or office or some other form of construction, people did not cut off the tree. On the contrary, it was protected by building a small wall around the tree (photo on the opposite page). Any kind of construction is usually modified according to where the tree had grown.
From the above given diagram you can see that 55% of the 70 peepal trees observed were either near or inside properly constructed temples (represented in blue). The plum colour represents 30% of the trees which had some form of religious connection i.e. either some thread was tied around it, or some stones which represent God, and small idols of Gods and Goddesses, were kept under them etc. The cream colour area in the chart represents 15% of the trees which appeared to have no religious activity connected to them. It is evident from the information given that conservation of the peepal tree has a strong religious and ritualistic base.

A huge number of Shani temples were found near the peepal tree. This tree is specially worshipped in Shani (Saturn) temples because of people’s beliefs that Lord Shani is pleased if the peepal tree is worshipped with sesame seeds and mustered oil. Furthermore, it is believed that if a lamp is lit under the tree on a Saturday,) their wishes will be granted and it keeps them away from the evil eye of Saturn. Some said that. “ise pujane se shani ka kasht mit jata hai” (“by worshipping this tree all the ill effects of planet Saturn will go away”). Another lady said “hume iski puja se bahut fayada hua” (“our worshipping it has benefited us a lot”). People not only conserve this tree because they need it for religious activities but there are some myths
regarding the Tree which generated a strong sense of fear among the masses. This can be inferred from examples discussed above. It is generally well-known among Hindus that the peepal tree is very sacred and cutting it is considered a sin. This has led us to say that the rituals, religious beliefs and fear, all together contribute in the conservation of this environmentally important tree.

- There is considerable amount of increase in the overall ritual activity in the urban areas.

This can be said because during the field investigation and interviews, especially in the urban area, it was observed that there is a considerable increase in the number of people doing the weakly ritual. This information was supported by the answer to the question, ‘how long have you been doing the ritual?’ During interviews people told us that “hum sal dedh sal se kar rahe hain, hum ko is se fayada hua ha” (“we are doing the ritual from one and a half years and it has benefited us”). The responses from the urban areas thus, can be termed as recent participation. This is represented in figure given below:

![Figure 30: Relationship of time with Ritual in urban area](image)

In figure 30, the pie represents the percentage of the relationship of time with ritual as can be clearly seen, the ritual seems to have started recently in the urban areas. A
significant amount namely, 60% of people said that they have started doing it recently. While a very small number, 10%, said they have been doing it for more than 5 years. However, 30% of people have been doing the ritual for more than 10 years. This data although derived from a very small sample size may indicate that the number of people performing the ritual recently have increased which is also sign of increase in overall ritual activity of the urban people but, there is still a significant number of people who follow the age old ritual due age old traditional convictions.

A number of people said that “ab bahut kuch aa gaya hai T.V. ki badaulat” (“now we know a lot of things regarding rituals due to the television”). A similar view was found while interviewing several urban priests and astrologers. They said that “yeh puja pahele se bahut barh gayi hai sab T.V. ki den hai” (“now these rituals have increased in the urban area because of the astrological and religious shows on television”). From these interviews it can be inferred that people have started performing the rituals more often due to the influence of television programs emphasising rituals and religious practices.

- There is a change in the ritual from urban to rural

One very important aspect that this study wants to explore is the difference in the kind of rituals and the reasons for practising the ritual in the three locations namely urban, semi urban and rural. Also, finding out has had on the protection and conservation of trees, especially the peepal tree. This was explored by using two parameters to see the change in the kind of rituals the graph which is percentage representation of the number of people in each location doing the traditional ritual indicating a decrease in the traditional ritual practice in the urban sites. The other graph represents percentage increase in weekly ritual activity in the urban area dividing the number of people doing traditional ritual (see appendix for difference in
Traditional ritual and weakly ritual) by the people interviewed in each location. The graph suggests that 75% of the people in rural areas follow the traditional ritual, whereas only 30% in the urban areas follow the traditional ritual. The result is further strengthened when figure 4 is compared with figure and shows that the number of people doing the weekly ritual is greater in the urban areas compared with that in the rural areas.

![Average percentage of people doing traditional ritual in the three locations](image1)

**Figure 31: Average percentages of people doing traditional ritual**

![Percentage representation of the people doing weakly ritual in all the three locations](image2)

**Figure 32: Percentage representations of the people doing weakly ritual**

Note: the sample size in each location was 20 people

Further investigation, it was revealed that that the increase of the ritual activity in urban areas is a new ritual suggested by the astrologers. This piece of information was supported by the field investigation and interview results. This conclusion was drawn because if you look at figure 6 given below you will find that in the urban areas about 60% of the total people interviewed told us “hum ko pandit ne bataya hai is liye
kar rahe hain. Kundali mein dosh tha” (“an astrologer has told us to do so because there was some fault in my birth chart.”). While, 30% people were doing the ritual traditionally and a very small percentage i.e. 10% people said that they are doing this ritual by their own initiative. On the other hand, figures 7 and 8 show that in rural areas this trend is completely reversed and 70% of the people are doing the ritual traditionally. Whereas, in the case of semi urban areas in figure 7 the astrologers influence has decreased from urban but is still more compared to in rural areas.

![Percentage representation of reasons for worship in urban area](image)

**Figure 33: Percentage representations of reasons for worshiping the peepal tree in urban area**

Note: sample was 20 people i.e. 60% of 20 represents astrologer influence in urban area
Figure 34: Percentage representations of reasons for the worship

Note: sample was 20 people i.e. 30% of 20 represents astrologer influence in semi urban

Figure 35: Percentage representations of reasons for doing ritual in rural area

Note: sample was 20 people i.e. 10% of 20 represents astrologer influence in rural

- Lack of knowledge about the environmental importance of this tree.

There is a lack of awareness about the environmental importance of the tree. This conclusion is based on the data which is depicted in percentage form and calculated by using the number of people in each location who told us that the peepal tree is an
environmentally important tree. They also said that we should conserve other such tree like Neem, Bargad, Pakariy, Imli and Mango because these trees are also good for the environment and are able to absorb various pollutants. The number of people in each area is very small, thus, leading us to conclude that in all the three areas the knowledge about environmental benefits of trees is very limited.

Figure 36: Percentage representing of environmental awareness level in all the three locations

Note: Sample size in each location is 20 people

**Discussion**

The first part of the thesis is about the importance of trees in religious rituals and how people perform rituals in and around them. Looking at this we may find that this ritualistic approach linking religion and trees is very strong and deep rooted. There is evidence in the literature that points to the fact that rituals around trees have been part of the day to day life of people which dates back to the Indus valley civilization. In Hinduism, as discussed previously, the importance of rituals is an integral part of traditional life. Two kind of ritual activities were observed - 1) Traditional rituals
which can be further divided into two, (a) community based and (b) personal
(2) Weakly rituals also referred as new rituals which are mainly done on the advise of
a priest or astrologers

Traditional community based rituals, like, Bargadi Amavas, somvati amavas, Amla Ekadeshai etc (described in previous chapter) which are dedicated to huge trees covering a large area are usually present in places which are community owned. Rituals around these trees are not celebrated every day but on a specific occasion according to the lunar (Hindu) calendar. The community-based rituals are very elaborate and need a lot of preparation. In ancient India women were not allowed to go out and interact with the men so these community-based rituals were not only a religious activity but acted as a social activity for the women who did most of the preparation, such as, made different kind of foods for the ceremony. These rituals played an important part in spreading the message of conservation among people because it usually included the narration of a story (example in previous chapter) containing a message regarding how the worship of a particular tree helped in fulfilling the desire of that person and helping him to get health and wealth benefits. The narration of the story promoted a feeling of gratitude, appreciation and confidence in the worshipper who not only followed the ritual himself but tried to spread the importance and asked young girls in the family to follow the tradition as well. These traditional rituals were celebrated by women because as a mother they interacted more within the family and there were more chances for passing on these traditions as values to the next generation.

The personal rituals consist of planting a tree/herb in the home garden or even in front of the house where it is worshipped everyday. Everyday worship is not very elaborate; it may consist only of watering the tree and lighting a lamp under it at
night. This personal ritual was usually performed to small plants and herbs which were easy to have in the house and came handy for using in food and home remedies. These rituals were done by the women of the house for the same reasons as mentioned above because women had a higher chance to act as role models for young children in the family. On close observation, these traditional ritual practices may seem to promote conservation without the knowledge of today’s practitioners. For example, they acted as a sustainable measure of conservation without any extra effort needed to promote sustainable strategies for forest management. Today, in general these traditional rituals related to different trees of religious and environmental importance are on a decline due to several reasons. Among them, the major reason is that in the globalized world women’ roles have changed and they have more responsibilities and also have started working outside the house. This leaves no time for them to observe these small rites and rituals. I am not advocating that female education and working is bad for rituals but rather that this is a reason for decline in ritual. The second main reason for the loss of traditional rituals is that our cities are becoming a jungle of concrete with more and more people living in multi-storey flats. This leaves them with no space to plant tree and shrubs in the house. The community places where big trees like peepal, bargad, neem, tamarind and mango would have been planted have decreased and replaced by car-parks and buildings. Thus, people find it difficult to practise these traditions and have to travel long distances to find these tree which leads to lack of motivation among people to perform these rituals and impacts effect on conservation and thus, the environment.

During our field work some very fascinating aspects came to light regarding rituals around the peepal tree. Firstly, we found that there has recently (1-2 years) been an increase in the ritual activity related to the peepal tree, especially in the urban areas.
People are taking lots of pains, travelling long distances to perform rituals around this particular tree. They are against the cutting of this particular tree. This was surprising because as has already been discussed there is usually a decrease in the ritual activities in the urban areas but, here we have found an increase in these activities. When we looked deeply at the practices of the ritual it became clear that even though there is increase in the performance of the ritual, they are not the traditional rituals around peepal tree followed from generations but rather new forms of the rituals. On further investigation, we found that, as has already been mentioned, ancient literature includes these rituals but that the ritual practises were not recommended for everyday practice. This was because some portion of these rituals, if done extensively, caused harm to the tree.

We could find that in some temples there was a board hanging on the tree stating that one should not put things like in the root for fear that it may affect the tree adversely. Most temples also protect the tree by putting a iron cage around the tree so that no one can harm the tree. According to ancient literature these rituals were practised only in some special circumstances, like if someone’s horoscope predicted widowhood, or if the planet Saturn is in a wrong position causing bad luck, poverty etc. On further exploration regarding the reasons for this new change evident from observation, three main reasons were observed - A) influence of the astrologer, b) television, and, c) fear.

The influence of an astrologer was cited as one of the major reasons for the increase in the ritual. This fact was also revealed during the interviews. Most of the people in the urban area said that they are doing this ritual because it is advised by an astrologer who suggested this ritual for a certain period of time in order to get rid of the ill effects of various planets in their birth chart. A large number of people told us
that today there are lots of shows on television that tell them to perform rituals in
order to attain good health, wealth and for success. This attitude is certainly
promoting the ritual but a very important thing to note here is that this promotion is
not self driven but that it is influenced by television and forms of globalization. As we
all know, media is the strongest and the fastest means of communication so its role in
promotion of the rituals has to be reckoned with. In this particular example, we found
that the media is playing a significant role in the promotion of these rituals through
advertising the tips (rituals) given by the astrologer for people to attain good health,
wealth, success, love, prosperity and peace. This kind of advertisement generates a
feeling in people to try and see if it may work and if it may get desired results.

This promotion of rituals through media can be seen as a positive effect by some
because it is leading to conservation of the tree as well as the ritual. However, the
sustainability factor of these practises is low because, firstly, the people doing the
ritual are only interested in it temporarily. Most of the people interviewed in the urban
areas replied that they have been advised to do the ritual for a limited period of time.
This data gives us a clue that there is high probability that people may not be bothered
whether the tree is protected or cut down after they have attained the benefits.
Secondly, since it is done on advice for a short time there is less possibility of any
kind of attachment to the ritual or to the tree. Contrary to this, the traditional rituals
are considered part of family heritage and passed down from one generation to
another with a strong sense of emotional bonding. This bonding is not only to the
ritual but also to the tree which has been part of the family over generations. Thirdly,
due to the promotion from media the masses have started participating in the ritual
and this can cause ill effect on the tree. These new rituals sometimes involve certain
practices like pouring oil in the roots which might be harmful to the tree. The
traditional rituals practices also involve offering of vermillion, fruits and putting figures made of dough on to the bark of the tree. However these are not very harmful because they are biodegradable and also this is only part of rituals which are celebrated once or twice a year on a single day.

Another issue which needs to be mentioned in this regards is that in the urban areas, very few people consider small rituals like watering the tree as part of their daily routine, whereas in the semi urban and rural areas, people tend to practise the simple ritual of watering a peepal tree as a part of their daily schedule. Thus, we can say that these new tends which are effected by media (a form of globalization) will not be as sustainable as the traditional systems.

This finding when compared with the other two locations i.e. semi urban and rural areas, the following trend was found, as represented in the graph given below,

![Graph showing astrologers trend](image)

**Figure 37: Graph showing astrologers trend**

This graph it can be see that the in the urban areas the influence of the astrologer was a major reason behind the practice of the ritual but that this reason declines as we move away from the urban areas, i.e., away from the influence of globalization. The
people who were interviewed in the semi urban and rural areas told us that only few people consulted the astrologer and followed the ritual prescribed by them. The respondents reported that consulting an astrologer was too expensive for them. Secondly, there is less availability of a trained astrologer in the rural and semi urban areas.

If we look at another graph given below, it depicts in percentage about number of people doing the traditional ritual in all the three locations. This represents a completely opposite trend, a large number of people perform the traditional ritual in the rural areas and as you move towards the city you will see that it has declined. This decline in the traditional rituals is due to the factors mention above. This indicates the fact that although in cities the overall ritual activity has increased but that the amount of traditional rituals which are more closely related to the tree and conservation are being replaced with new rituals which have a short term self centred motive.

![Graph showing the trend of traditional ritual of somvati amavas in all the three locations](image)

**Figure: 38: Graph showing trend traditional rituals**

The observation made during the field investigation suggested that in all the three locations, people were aware of the religious importance of the tree but only a very small number of people were aware of the environmental importance of the tree.
When asked why this tree should not be cut most of them said that various gods and goddesses resided on this tree who should be worshipped, as mentioned above. They also told us that this tree is mentioned in the ancient books of Hinduism.

Only a few people, especially the priests, talked about the environmental importance of not only peepal tree but also of other trees. They informed us that the peepal tree absorbs more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and releases more oxygen in comparison to any other tree that is planted in the vicinity. The main reason for the priest to be aware of this fact was not the due to environmental education but because priests are kind of small religious leaders who are well versed in mythological and ancient literature, like the Vedas and Purans. These texts mention the environmental values of these trees. This provides further evidence that people are not aware of the environmental benefits of the tree but are protecting the tree because they have strong religious beliefs regarding the tree. The second observation was the presence of a strong element of fear among the people that in harming this particular tree the deities residing on the tree will harm them. Some narratives that have already been discussed above which clearly show the extent of this deep rooted fear. This fear is not only prevalent in rural and semi urban areas but even in the urban areas where Hindus are not willing to cut or harm the tree.

This investigation has helped us to articulate that modernization and urbanization are a threat to these local self sustainable approaches of conservation, however, if we take necessary steps there is scope to find a balance between modernity and tradition.
Figure 39: Photo showing how a peepal tree is breaking the wall, but is still protected. (Urban area)
Figure 40: Religious activities in semi-urban, urban and rural areas respectively.
Figure 41: Females performing daily ritual and tradition ritual in semi urban and rural area respectively.

Figure 42: A large number of people worshipping the tree (urban area).
Figure 43: People worshiping the peepal tree (urban area).
Figure 44: Photo showing a board hanging on the trunk of the peepal tree in a temple (urban area). This states that, “please do not offer oil to the tree otherwise it will die.”
Conclusion
Conclusion

The role of religion in environmental conservation is controversial for some scholars because a few scholars believe that some religions and religious activities may effect the environment adversely, however it has been proved by several examples that religious and ritualistic beliefs of indigenous people can play an important role in the conservation of biodiversity as well as environment.

Thus the present study intends to explore the link between religion, rituals and conservation with the help of the following objectives

1) To what extent do ritual practises of common man (non indigenous) contribute in the conservation of certain species of plants?

2. What, if any difference is observed in the rituals in three types of locations, dwelling places namely: urban, semi urban and rural?

3. If there are differences, what is their significance and what accounts for them?

For this purpose we explored the rituals around peepal tree as an example because it is amongst the most widely accepted religiously symbolic trees in Hinduism. People believe that many gods and goddesses reside in various parts of the peepal tree, and that worshipping it on different occasions was believed to yield benefits for health and wealth.

Research methods consisted primary of interviews, participant observation and non participant observation facilitated the field work.

Preliminary investigation also supported the fact that the peepal tree holds an important position in Hinduism and is considered very sacred. Hence, people were not willing to cut or harm this tree. The reason behind this was not only the religious and ritualistic importance of this tree, but fear also played an important role in some cases. It was found that many rituals around this particular tree are observed at
different time of the year. Some rituals were performed weekly, a few occurred more than once in a year, while others were performed yearly. Thus, it is logical to conclude that people need the tree throughout the year for various religious activities and they were not inclined in cutting down this tree.

Accordingly, it is safe to conclude that the rituals around this tree can and do play an important role in protecting this environmentally and medicinally beneficial tree.

The interviews and observations at various sites revealed the surprising fact that there is an increase in the ritual activity around the peepal tree in urban areas and it reduced as we moved towards rural areas. This was assessed by using a parameter of time, i.e., when people began performing the rituals. On closer examination, the findings indicate that although there was an increase in the ritual activity around this tree in the urban area, the rituals were not the traditional rituals followed by generations, but new rituals which have become popular due to influence of astrologers and the media. People performed these rituals for certain duration of time on the advice provided by these new sources in the media to get rid of specific problems they faced in life and for good health and for overall prosperity.

The rituals performed in urban areas were then contrasted with the descriptions about the ritual that were found in the ancient books of Hinduism. There are descriptions of offering articles like vermillion, dough, flower etc to the tree. However, to the best of my knowledge, descriptions regarding the action of pouring mustard or sesame oil which is harmful for the tree in the roots of the tree are not present in the texts, but are included in the ritualistic practices of the urban dwellers.

It is also important to consider here that ancient Hindu texts provide a specific set of rules in the performance of these rituals. These rituals were not advised for everyone, but rather were only supposed to be performed by a small number of people who had
problems in their horoscopes or to avert ill effects of the planet Saturn, and for a short
duration of time. These prescriptive rules lead us to conclude that the rituals served a
specific purpose and that the promoted the preservation of this religiously important
tree. Thus, we can say that these ritual practices should be performed with proper
advice and guidance.

For example, a ritual like the watering of the tree every day, or, lighting a lamp under
it in the evening as practised outside the city are advised in the ancient texts works to
promote preservation of the tree. They are a part of everyday life of the people in rural
and semi urban areas and the people in these areas are also more enthusiastic about
the traditional rituals which are performed once or twice in a year without harming the
tree. This is strengthened by the fact that most people during the interviews, did not
approve of cutting or harming the tree when asked if they would consider cutting this
particular tree.

As discussed in the previous paragraph the advertisement of the ritual activity in the
media (a form of modernization) has the potential to cause negative effect on the tree
and promote certain rituals which are not advised for daily performance.

This led us to conclude that religious and ritual activities followed by common
man can be an effective tool in solving the problem of biodiversity and tree cover loss
at local level. This is strengthened by the fact that most people during the interviews
did not approve cutting or harming the tree, when asked if they would consider
cutting the particular tree.

Nevertheless, the media can also act as a very good tool for spreading the
awareness about the rituals and the environmental values of these trees only if the
information is correctly and proper presented. Thus this new trend if carefully handled
can also act as a positive strategy for the promotion of the ritual and protection of the
tree, so long as the ecologically harmful rituals are not encouraged.

Governmental and non governmental agencies can help in this regards by encouraging
steps to inform people, performing this new ritual, of the importance of the tree. The
information might also help people to understand the value of the tree and develop a
deeper feeling of attachment towards it. Thus, we may infer that although
modernization is affecting the self sustainable local systems in a negative way, with
due care, it can act as a useful means of spreading the message of environmental
conservation among the masses.

Our suggestion is that governmental and non governmental organizations should,
firstly, take steps to check the information publicized through media. They should
enforce rules that people like astrologers (who appear on media) should provide
authentic references to the rituals which are being recommended by them. Secondly,
environmental risks and benefits of the rituals should also be incorporated within the
information publicised to the general population.

Traditional rituals can help promote the protection and conservation of these valuable
trees for our future generations. This thesis has endeavoured to provide a brief
description of the intimate relationship between man and nature expressed in
religions, like Hinduism, as an alternative strategy to help protect and conserve the
environment and its biodiversity.
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Questionnaire for the main subject

General information

1. Name
2. Age
3. Occupation
4. Education
5. Caste
6. Type of family: a) joint b) nuclear
7. How long have you been living in this city/town / village
8. Type of housing
9. Address

Rituals based questions:

1. For how long have you been doing this ritual?
   a) Is this ritual done for generations in your family?
   b) Have you started practising this ritual recently?

2. Do you perform these rituals on other trees or only to this specific tree. If others, then which other ones?

3. What do you do in the ritual (description of the process)?

4. Do you remember which rituals were performed by your grandmother and mother?

5. Have you observed any change in any ritual since the time of your grandmother / mother?

6. Why do you perform this ritual?
   i. Just because you are told to do it?
   ii. Because you feel that these are important?
   iii. Because it is required by family members?
   iv. To keep the family tradition?

7. Are you enthusiastic about these rituals?

8. Do you carry out or try to do the rituals at the same tree every year?

9. Do you protect the tree for next year or you feel there are plenty of other ones?

10. Would you like to promote these rituals to your next generation?

11. Are your children or young children in the family excited about these rituals?
Questionnaire for the new generation

1. Name
2. Age
3. Occupation
4. Education
5. Religion
6. Caste
7. Type of family a) joint b) nuclear
8. How long have you been living in this city/town / village
9. Type of housing (may give an idea of income group)

Rituals based questions:

10. How many rituals around these trees you are aware of?
11. When are they performed
12. Do you have any idea of why these are performed?
13. Do you participate in them yes/no?
14. For how long have you seen these rituals happening?
15. Do you know why these two trees are important and are you enthusiastic about these rituals?
Questionnaire for older generation

General information

1. Name
2. Age
3. Occupation
4. Education
5. Religion
6. Caste
7. Type of family  a) joint  b) nuclear
8. How long have you been living in this city/town / village?
9. Type of housing (may give an idea of income group)?
10. How many rituals around these trees you are aware of?
11. When are they performed?
12. For how long have you seen this ritual happening?
13. Did you see/ participate in these rituals when you were a child?
14. Do you remember which rituals were performed by your grandmother and mother?
15. Have you observed any change in any ritual since the time of your grandmother / mother?
16. Did you observe any ritual around trees which was performed by your grandmother or mother but is being lost or people have stopped participating in it.
17. If yes then what kind of ritual was it?
18. Why do you think it got lost?
19. What makes you do this ritual?