

Worshipping the Lords of the Jungle

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Primaeval jungles like *Sinharaja* that covered immense expanses of mountains and valleys would have naturally created in the minds of our earliest ancestors an awe and reverence beyond measure. A tree, like a man, lives and dies and has a soul or spirit as sensitive as that of a man. Those gigantic trees that megestically rose above the lush green tropical vegetation came to be venerated as *vanaspati*, literally, 'lords of the jungle' or 'kings of the wood.' Like gods, these giants of the jungle provided shade and shelter for man and commanded, in return, his awe and reverence for the Unknown.

For the Hindus and the Buddhist who are nurtured in the Indian tradition, trees of gigantic proportions are abodes of deities or spirits. They thus began to worship them as if they were themselves deities or spirits. To fell a sacred tree or to cut a bough was to injure and hurt the living tree and thereby the deity or spirit residing in the tree.

Though *vanaspati* signifies, in general, a large tree of gigantic proportions, it denotes, more specifically, a tree that bears fruits apparently without blossoms. Nature herself made *vanaspatis* unique among the trees of the jungle: that they are of gigantic proportions; that they seem to bear fruit without blossoms and that some of their fibres descend downwards from their branches.

In Indian mythology, *vanaspati* trees are among those called *kshīra vrikshas*, literally, 'milk trees' or trees that yield sap or 'milk'. Four kinds of trees figure prominently among them:

- (a) *nyagrōdha* (*Ficus Indica*)
- (b) *udumbara* (*Ficus Glomerata*)
- (c) *asvattha* (*Ficus Religiosa*)
- (d) *madhūka* (*Bassia Latifolia*)

Indian mythology abounds in stories and legends that glorify the magic of these lords of the jungle.

The Indian fig tree, *nyagrōdha*, popularly called the ‘banyan tree’ is known as ‘*nuga*’ in Sinhala. It attracts the eye of the beholder by means of the fibres that descend from its branches to the earth, where they take root, in order to bring forth new stems. The Indian terms *nyag-rōdha* or *nig-rōdha* mean, literally, ‘growing downwards’, referring to the fibres of this tree.

Folklore attributes another feature to make this tree unique among the trees of the jungle. This feature is known as ‘*nigrōdha parimandala*’, according to which the height of a *nuga* tree is equal to its length, calculated from the extreme left of its boughs to the extreme right. Buddhist painters and sculptors used this feature in determining the proportions of the images of the Buddha that they executed.

Sinhala Buddhists believe that the *nuga* tree is the abode of a deity, (*dēvatā*). Travellers and pilgrims who enter a jungle path still perform certain rituals at the foot of a *nuga* tree at the entrance to the path to invoke the blessings of the deity to ensure safe passage through the jungle. Usually, a husked coconut is split or a branch of another plant is hung on the *nuga* tree for this purpose.

The glomerous fig tree, *udumbara*, is known in Sinhala as ‘*dimbul*’ or ‘*attikka*’. It does not figure prominently in Buddhist folklore. The fact that it bears fruits without flowers, however, is a feature that has found its way to Sinhala similes and proverbs.

The *madhūka* tree, known in Sinhala as *mī*, is one that commands respect among farmers but it was not considered a holy tree. *Mī pup*, its flowers, however, play an important role in Sinhala folktales.

The *vanasapati* that plays the foremost role in Buddhist rites and rituals is the *asvattha* (Pali, *assattha*) tree. Hence the term ‘Ficus Religiosa’. It is also called the ‘pipal’ or ‘pippal’ tree in English, a name that has its origin in the Sanskrit term ‘*pippala*’.

Etymologically, the name ‘*asvattha*’ means ‘the tree under which the horse (*asva*) stood (*stha*)’. Whether this is an allusion to the horse in the Vedic ritual *asva mēdha* (horse sacrifice) is not certain. It is also believed that the fruit of this tree becomes ripe in the month of *Āsvina*, hence the term ‘*asvattha*’ to denote also ‘the day of the fullmoon of this month’.

The *asvattha* tree came to be known among Buddhists as the *bōdhi* tree (Sinhala *bō*) because of its association with the *bōdhi* or Enlightenment of the Buddha. According to Buddhist mythology, every Buddha attains Enlightenment under a tree and this tree comes to be designated the *bōdhi vriksha* (Pali, *bōdhi rukkhā*). Literally, it means ‘The Tree of Wisdom’ but as Rhys Davids rightly points out “the wisdom was the wisdom of the Master not of the tree or of the tree-god and could not be obtained by eating its fruit” (Buddhist India, p. 230)

Why did the Buddha choose an *asvattha* tree as his *bōdhi vriksha*? It could, perhaps, be due to natural factors, such as its height, luxuriant foliage or due to cultural factors such as sanctity it already enjoyed as a holy tree. “The tree was certainly held in high esteem even as early as the Vedic poems. Vessels for the mystic *Soma* cult were made of its wood; and so were the caskets containing the medicinal herbs used in the mystic craft of the physician of the day. The upper portion of the fire-drill — and the production of fire was held to be a mystery — was of the wood of the Pippal tree. And in one passage the tree in heaven under which the souls of the blessed recline is likened to a Pippala” (Buddhist India, p. 231)

It must be noted, however, that all the Buddhas did not choose the *asvattha* as their *bōdhi vrikshas*. As Malalasekera notes, “The tree is different in the case of each Buddha” (Dictionary of Pali Proper Names, Vol. II, p. 319).

The *bōdhi* tree under which the last of the Buddhas attained Enlightenment was located in a picturesque land near modern Bodh Gaya in North India. The original tree is no more but the tree that grew from one of its saplings continues to this day at Anuradhapura. It was brought to Sri Lanka in the third century before Christ and was planted in the *Mahā Mēga vana*, the royal park at the capital city of Anuradhapura. It is called the *Jaya Sri maha bōdhi*. It is considered the holiest of the trees of the Buddhist world and the oldest of the trees on record.

Buddhist literature mentions six kinds of tree-deities (*vriksha dēvatā*). The *Chulla Dhamma Samadana Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya* classifies them as follows:

- (1) *ārāma dēvatā*, those associated with groves, flower gardens, parks, and so on.
- (2) *vana dēvatā*, those associated with forests, such as *Andha vana*, *Subhaga vana* and so on.
- (3) *vriksha dēvatā*, those associated with trees such as *naleru*, *puvimanda* and so on.
- (4) *ōsadhi dēvatā*, those associated with medicinal trees, such as *aralu*, *nelli* and so on.
- (5) *trina dēvatā*, those associated with trees such as coconuts and palms.
- (6) *vanaspati dēvatā*, those associated with trees that bear fruits without blossoms.
(*Tripitakayehi Sanskritika Lakshana* by Rev. Talalle Dhammananda, p. 207)

On this basis, the deity who resides on the *bōdhi* tree falls into the class of *vanaspati dēvatā*.

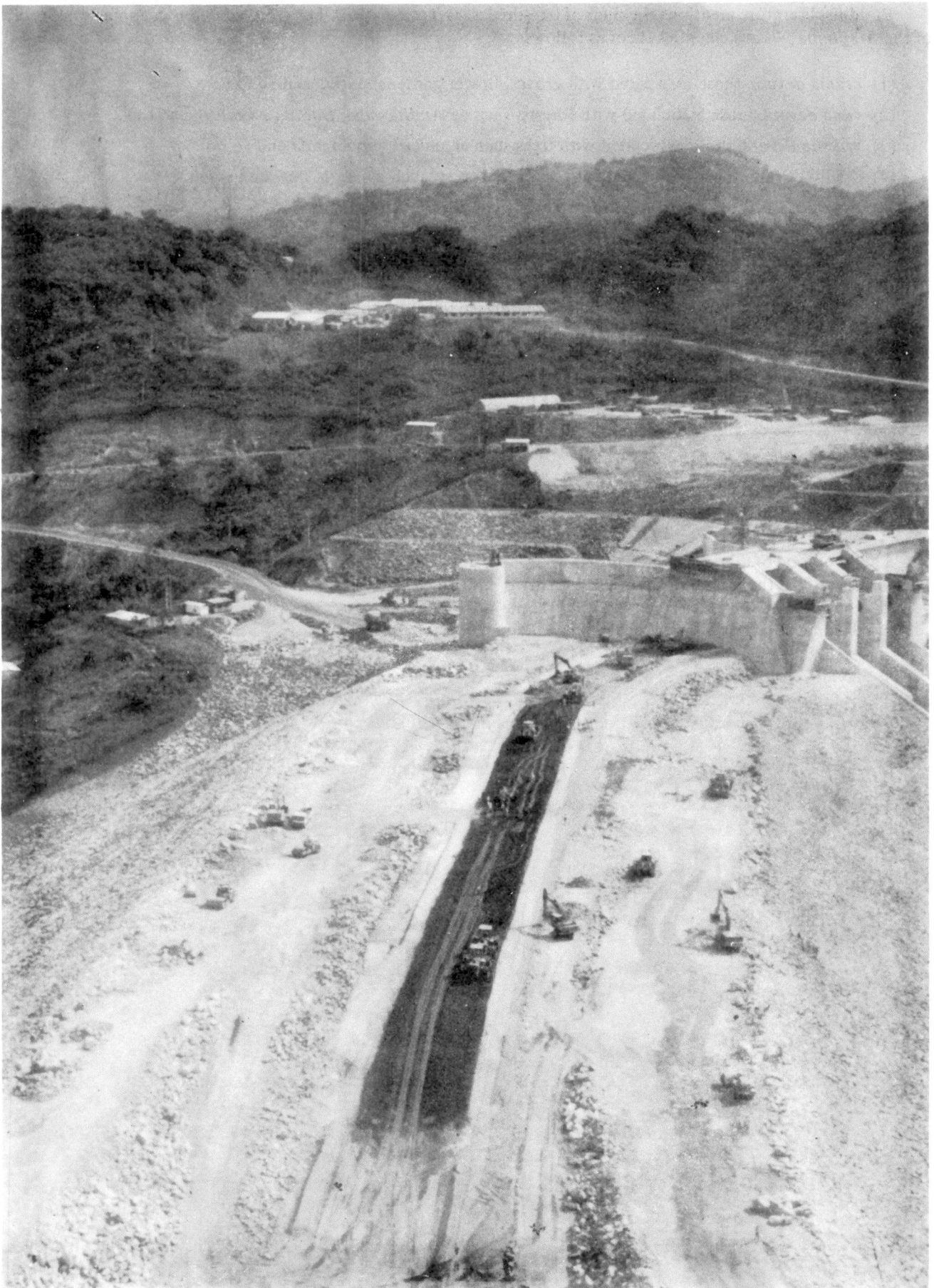
Sinhala folklore mentions another tree that has associations with deities and spirits. It is the margosa tree, known in Sinhala as *kohomba*. The deity or spirit that resides in this tree is known as *kohombā deviyo*, *kohombā yakā* and sometimes simply as *kohombayā*. The foremost ritual that invokes the blessings of this deity or spirit is known as the *Kohombā Kankāriya* or *Kohombā Yakkama*.

It is believed that a house situated near a *kohomba* tree would not be afflicted with those diseases folkloristically termed '*deyyange leda*' (diseases of the deities) or '*ammavarunge leda*' (diseases of the mothers), such as chicken pox, small pox and measles.

That the wood of this tree has magical powers is borne out by the placing of the '*kohom pōruva*', a plank of the *kohomba* wood, at the foot of the post in the centre of the threshing floor (*kamata*). The hole in which this plank is placed, along with a few other objects, is known as the '*arak vala*'; the hole (*vala*) which ensures protection (*arak*). If this ritual is not observed, farmers believe, paddy would disappear.

A clay pot containing leaves of the *kohomba* tree is used in some of the folk rituals performed to invoke the blessings of the *kohombā deviyo*. This pot is called the *kohomba kalē*, and it is placed on the head of the devotee while dancing. Both Buddhists and Hindus take part in this ritual.

Trees are a gift of Nature and men have, from the dawn of history, worshipped them for their aesthetic beauty, medicinal efficacy and magical charm.



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