



Śālaśiri Worship in Jalpaiguri: An Offshoot of Pre-Aryan Arborolatriy?

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Abstract:

Śālaśiri worship in Jalpaiguri is done to protect the people from wild animals in forests. It has both tribal and non-tribal elements. The Śāla tree is considered sacred by the tribals. Few studies indicate that the tribal worship of Śāla trees was adopted by the Aryans after the latter's conquest of tribal lands. From the ancient Śālabhañjikā tradition to the Sarhul festival of the tribals of the present day, the Śāla tree has been venerated by the people irrespective of ethnic or religious identities. This paper is intended to highlight the antiquity of the Śāla worship and how it is related to both Aryan and non-Aryan traditions.

Keywords: *Śālaśiri, Śālēśvarī, Śālabhañjikā, Indra, Sarhul, Jaher Than, Jalpaiguri, North Bengal, Baikunthapur*

Introduction:

Tree worship, or arborolatriy, has ancient roots in India. From the beginning of civilization down to the present day, trees are considered an important part of the religious life of Indians. In the Harappan culture, several archaeological findings have been found that indicate Pīpala (*Ficus religiosa*) and Nīma (*Azadirachta indica*) were important trees with respect to the religion of the Harappans (Simoons, 1998, pp. 49–51; Shah and Pavaskar, 2019, p. 198). This undoubtedly hints at the fact that some forms of tree worship were certainly in vogue long before the introduction of the Aryan culture. It may be possible that these were later incorporated into the Vedic religion (Jain, 1991, p. 193). Later on, a vast amount of Hindu



literature strongly advocates the preservation of forests and the veneration of trees as means to gain spiritual merits. In Hinduism, trees are often associated with gods. For example, Vaṭa tree (*Ficus benghalensis*) is associated with Śiva, Pīpala, or Aśvattha with Viṣṇu, etc. (Giri and Hedayetullah, 2019, p. 25). Pīpala, or Aśvattha, is also revered by the Buddhists (Salunkhe, 2017). Tribal people of Indian states like Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, etc. consider the Śāla tree (*Shorea robusta*) sacred. The word "Śāla" comes from the Saṃskṛta word "śālā", which means "rampart" (Krishna and Amrithalingam, 2013). The earliest mention of the word, as suggested by Levman (2021), can be found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* with the meaning of "being in house" (p. 163). Levman has also shown that the word "Śāla" in the sense of a tree is first mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*. The word is also found in a number of the earliest *Buddha Sūtra* texts, such as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* where Buddha is shown to have died between two Śāla trees (Duncan, 2015, p. 3). Buddha is also said to have been born under a Śāla tree (Gupta, 2001, p. 75). In a *Jātaka* story, a Bodhisatva is shown as a Śāla tree. The story also described the Śāla trees as sacred and lucky; they have their own spirit in them, and other tree spirits also reside within them. The *Ācāraṅga Sūtra* of the Jainas records that Mahāvīra attained enlightenment under a Śāla tree (Price, 2010, p. 82). "Tālasarja" mentioned in the *Arthaśāstra* may have been the Śāla tree (Shamasastri, 1951, p. 107). The *Vṛhat Saṃhitā* states that Śāla wood is auspicious and should be used to make beds, seats, etc. (Chowdhury et al., 1958, p. 150). In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma, in order to prove his worth, shot an arrow and pierced seven Śāla trees in a row. Association with Rāma, an incarnation of Viṣṇu, made Śāla trees sacred to the pious Hindus (Gupta, 2001, p. 77; Krishna and Amrithalingam, 2013). At present, Śāla is worshiped by the tribals for prosperity and protection. It is noteworthy to mention that the festival of *Sarhul* or *Sarahula*, where the Śāla tree is worshiped by the tribals, has attracted the devotion and reverence of non-tribal people in India as well. Like *Sarhul*, the cult of *Śālaśiri* in Jalpaiguri is also known for the worship of the Śāla tree. Though the tradition of *Śālaśiri* is



primarily found in or around Jalpaiguri, it is also found in Cooch Behar and Darjeeling as well. However, the Baikunthapur forest has a slightly different tradition of Śāla worship. The worship of Śālaśiri is a folk tradition. Information regarding the worship of Śālaśiri is mostly found in oral history, and the reliability factors of the information obtained vary considerably. This paper will try to locate the origin of the Śālaśiri cult, particularly whether it has some links with non-Aryan tree worship or not.

Śālaśiri: A Forest God

Śālaśiri worship is performed in the northern districts of West Bengal, particularly in Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, and Cooch Behar, where dense forests of Śāla trees are found. The deity is also known as *Śālēśvarī*. Though the name seems to be of a female one, the deity is a male one (Sanyal, 1965, p. 147; Roy, 1975, p. 120–22). The original name of the deity must have been "Śālēśwan", and the deity received worship from both the Mēca and the Rājabanśī peoples (Saha, 1998, p. 294). C. C. Sanyal (1965) opined that the worship of Śālaśiri may have been started by the Mēca tribal people of the region, and later it was absorbed by the Rājabanśīs (p. 147). It may be possible that the original name "Śālēśwan" was later abbreviated as "Śālēśvarī". However, the Rājabanśīs call the deity "Śālaśiri". The deity is mostly worshiped by the Rājabanśīs in the Baikunthapur forest in Jalpaiguri and other areas where there is a significant Rājabanśī population. Sanyal (1965) further informed us that the worship of Śālaśiri is performed in Āṣāṛha, or in the months of June–July (p. 147). However, G. S. Roy (1975) tells us that it is performed in Baiśākha, or in April–May (p. 121). It has been learned that during earlier times, there was no image of Śālaśiri, and the worship of the deity was performed under a big Śāla tree. The devotees made an altar under the Śāla tree that is known as *Thān* (Roy, 1975, p. 121). However, since the last few decades, an earthen image of a male god seated on a tiger has been used for worship and left in the forest for the protection of the workers who go



to the forest to collect wood (Sanyal, 1965, p. 148; Sharma, 2018, p. 359). The image of the deity looks like a man who is smoking (Bhowmik, 1978, p. 74n2). Roy (1975) argued that the forests of North Bengal have many wild animals such as elephants, tigers, etc., and the cult of Śālaśiri may have originated from the belief that if propitiated properly, the deity will protect people from these wild animals (p. 121). It is forbidden to enter the forest without paying homage to Śālaśiri (Sanyal, 1965, p. 147; Roy, 1975, p. 121).

As mentioned earlier, the worship of Śālaśiri can be performed with or without an image. One striking feature of the worship is that only men are permitted to participate in it (Sanyal, 1965, p. 147; Roy, 1975, p. 121). The men of a village enter the forest with flowers, milk, earthen lamps, mustard oil, vermilion, etc. and assemble at the foot of a big Śāla tree. The officiating priest then performs the whole ritual. Another important aspect of the Śālaśiri cult is the worship of two other figures prior to the main ritual. In the Baikunthapur forest, the devotees first worship Duḃyārī Ṭhākura and Kanṭhapāla, and then they initiate the main ritual (Sanyal, 1965, p. 147). C. C. Sanyal (1965) opined that Duḃyārī Ṭhākura is a big tree that acts as a doorkeeper, and Kanṭhapāla was a celebrated Mēca who once saved the men living in the forest (p. 147). Kanṭhapāla is represented by another tree. However, these deities are not worshiped in other forests of North Bengal, where the Śālaśiri Cult is practiced. Sanyal (1965) also showed that the cult surely had a Mēca origin. In the Baikunthpur forest, Duḃyārī Ṭhākura and Kanṭhapāla are offered a pair of cocks, and instead of killing them, they are set free by the worshipers in the forest. It was done to tell the wild animals of the forest that the men were about to enter the forest and that they should refrain from killing them.

The incantations used in the worship of Śālaśiri are confusing. One incantation referred Śālaśiri as *Mahārājā*, and another as *Mahāmayī*. The latter indicates that the deity must be female. However, that is not the case. Digbijay De Sarkar (1982) believes that Śālaśiri is actually the name of Śiva (p. 29). This form of Śiva is invoked for fertility and the growth of



paddy and forest products. This becomes clear in the sacrificial ritual, where pigeons and goats are offered to the Sal tree by uttering an incantation that clearly mentions the god Śiva. Another interesting fact is that Kanṭhapāla is offered hemp by the devotees, and it is well known that hemp is used in the worship of Śiva by the Hindus. Śiva is also known as *Paśupatinātha* or the Lord of Animals, the earliest evidence of which goes back to the Indus Valley Civilization (Marshall, 1931). Using an incantation that clearly mentions god Śiva, the attributes of protection from animals, and the use of hemp in the worship points to the fact that the cult of Śālaśiri has some affinity with the Śiva worship of Hinduism.

Genesis of Śālaśiri Worship:

It has already been shown that Śāla tree is repeatedly mentioned in the Indian scriptures from the very beginning. However, the worship of Śāla tree is even older than that. The tribals of different parts of India, particularly eastern India, have a tradition of Śāla worship that predates the Vedic culture. The blossoming of Śāla flowers is celebrated by the tribals in the festival of *Sarhul*. "Sar" literally means "year," and the meaning of "hul" is "to commemorate" (Oram, 2020, p. 177). Therefore, it is clear that the Sarhul festival is celebrated to commemorate the new year of the tribals. Each tribe celebrates it in their own way (Sikarwar, 2018, p. 53). The festival of Sarhul is a part of the Sarna religion that is centered around the worship of Śāla tree. Most of the tribes, such as Munda, Ho, Santal, and Khuruk, have reclaimed their religion as the Sarna religion. Their chief god, Jaher era Bonga, resides in the Śāla tree. The tribals, therefore, erect *Jaher than* in Śāla groves to worship their chief deity (Hembrom, 2003). This is similar to *Thān* which is made under the Śāla tree to worship Śālaśiri. It may be possible that the practice of erecting *Thān* has roots in the tribals' worship of forest gods and was diffused or transmitted from the tribal people of eastern India to the people of North Bengal.



The Śāla tree with full blossom, as argued by P. K. Maity (1989), was worshiped in ancient India to remove barrenness among the childless (p. 180). The tribals worship the god Dharmesh and the mother goddess Chalapacho Devi, whose spirits are manifested in Śāla trees (Markose, 2018). An incantation used in the worship of Śālasīri at Mantadari village in the Baikunthapur forest indicates that along with Śālasīri, other deities are also invoked and welcomed (Sanyal, 1965, p. 148). This seems similar to the notion of Śāla trees as the embodiments of other tree spirits, as mentioned earlier. The *Śālabhañjikā* tradition of ancient India, where a maiden woman touched a Śāla tree by her hand, was a fertility cult. It was believed that the Śāla tree would be fertilized by the touch of a maiden woman. The word "Śālabhañjikā" literally means "breaking a branch of a Śāla tree" (Chugh, 2017). However, the original meaning was gradually forgotten, and the word "Śālabhañjikā" came to mean a sculptural representation where a woman is touching or breaking the branch of any tree. In the Buddhist legends, it has been shown that Māyā, the mother of Buddha, gave birth to the latter while trying to reach the branch of a Śāla tree. Since then, it has become a symbol of impermanence in Buddhism (Von Gontard, 2017, p. 21). Sculptural motifs showing a girl standing close to a tree, plucking flowers from a Śāla tree, or touching the tree with her foot have been found at Sanchi, Mathura, and Bharhut (Krishna and Amrithalingam, 2013). The theme of these sculptures, argued Randhawa (1964.), may have originated from the Buddhist myths where Māyā is shown as grabbing the branch of a Śāla tree or plucking the flower of a Śāla tree (p. 17). The *Avadānaśataka* indicates that the Śālabhañjikā was a festival that was celebrated when Śāla trees were in full blossom (Vogel, 1929, p. 202). This seems similar to the tribals' worship of Śāla trees in full bloom. The tribals' tradition of Śāla worship may have been later adopted by the Buddhists.

In Bengal, the Bagdi tribes, as shown by J. F. Hewitt (1894), wed in an arbour made by the branches of the Śāla tree. Certainly, the Śāla tree is considered to have some positive



influence on life. The Oraons believe that the Śāla grove is the residence of Sarna Burhi, a goddess of rain (Porteous, 2002, p. 123; Frazer, 1900, p. 211; Dalton, 1872, p. 261). The Vedic rain god Indra is also worshiped by the people of Bengal with pillars of Śāla trees. The festival is known as *Indra Dhvaja* or *Indra Parb* (O'Malley, 2011 [1910], p. 214–15; Ghosh, 2003, p. 76; Maity, 1989, p. 180). Indra Dhvaja is basically a pillar worship where people worship poles of Śāla trees. Tapashi Ghosh (2003) argued that pillar worship was practiced by the non-Aryans, and when they were defeated by the Aryans, it was adopted by the latter (p. 76). Swarupa Gupta (2009) also believes that the Indra Dhvaja was actually a non-Aryan practice that was later Aryanized (p. 300). It may be possible that the worship of Śāla tree by the tribals was appropriated by the Aryans. Later, it was also transmitted to different parts of India.

Conclusion:

The foregoing discussion highlighted that the cult of Śālaśiri has striking similarities with the tribals' worship of Śāla trees and also with the Vedic worship of Indra Dhvaja. The Śāla tree in full blossom is worshiped by both the tribals and the non-tribals. The aspect of fertility, both for women and agricultural fields, is present in tribal and non-tribal beliefs. The Śālabañjikā, where a Śāla tree is fertilized by the touch of a maiden woman, and the fact that the Śāla tree was worshiped to remove barrenness, point to the fertility aspect of women. Sarna Burhi, a goddess whose abode is said to have been in the Śāla trees, has some influence on rain. The Vedic god Indra, whose worship is done by using the poles of Śāla wood, is also invoked for rain. These are related to the fertility of agricultural land. Dedication of sacrifices to the god Śiva is another aspect that links Śālaśiri with the larger pantheon of Hindu gods. While it is difficult to prove that Śālaśiri is a Hindu god, there is ample evidence to suggest that it has both tribal and non-tribal elements in it. The use of *Thān* in the worship of Śālaśiri may have been adopted from the tribals of Eastern India. Moreover, Śāla tree as a god is itself a tribal belief



that was later adopted by the Aryans. The arguments of Ghosh and Gupta seem plausible: the tribal cults were Aryanized after the Aryans conquered the tribal lands. Later on, these modified traditions were diffused in different parts of India. Alternatively, it can also be possible that the tribal elements of Śāla worship were present all over India and were later modified through constant interactions with the Aryans. However, more research is needed to support these assumptions.

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