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Laws Of the Woods

He who plants a tree will have his reward" promises a verse from the Rig Veda written over 3,000 years ago. Care for the forests that quilt our earth is not new, neither is the vision that clasps them one with the life beam that permeates all form and respects them as homes of sylvan devas. Ancient Hindu law-books are spotted with passages that enjoin rulers to maintain strict departments of forestry and parks - protecting and nurturing all wild and fruit bearing trees and punishing poachers. They were to be staffed by arboreal experts so ecologically sensitive they could perceive trees' influence on the climactic and social environment and forecast accordingly: "If the mango tree should thrive well, there will be prosperity in the land; if bhallata should thrive, there will be fear; if peelu, there will be health; if khadira and sami, there will be famine; if arjuna there will be good rain. If kapittha should bear blossoms there will be good rain," wrote Hindu ecologist Varahamihira in his Brihat Samhita 1,500 years ago.

The Superintendent of Forests was called an "aramahadhipati," according to Shukracharya author of the Shukraniti (circa 100 CE) and was expected "to know all the causes of growth of plants and trees" as well as all their medicinal properties. The superindendent also had to create and maintain "parks, artificial forests and pleasure gardens...In these parks, the king should indulge in enjoyments with the populace, womenfolk, actors, musicians, poets and magicians."

Hindu forestry management persisted - with minor lapses during war campaigns when wood was needed for chariots - until the British came and recklessly chopped down India's giant forests to build railways. Nevertheless sylvan sensitivity remains. "I am afraid," wrote R. Raghunath Rao in the Madras Standard in 1906, "it is not generally known to the European what the feelings of the Hindus are regarding forests and trees." With mild theological exaggeration, but innocent charm, he testified: "Their religion tells them that trees have souls like men; that cutting down a living tree is a bad as killing a man; that their twigs, even branches, leaves, when absolutely required, should be removed without any harm to the trees; that only dried trees should be cut down for fuel; that forests should not be

destroyed because in addition to other reasons, they are the residences of those in the third and fourth ashramas; that trees also are the tabernacles of God, and that to plant a tree is a virtuous act."

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