

Akshaya Vata, The Eternal Tree



The recent May storms have knocked down many trees. I was particularly upset about a flowering Gulmohar at its radiant best lying across the road, wrenched from its trunk, its wounded stump a reminder of our careless felling of trees to make way for high-rise developments and the adverse effect of this on the planet's eco-system.

Symbolism of the Tree of Life Motif

Trees, emblematic of fertility and fecundity also symbolize the essential life force that flows through all of creation. A verse from the *Yoga Vashist* refers to the 'Tree of Life' as consciousness itself, the source from which sprigs the world as the fruit of this consciousness.

*"The five elements are the seed of which the world is the tree;
and the eternal consciousness is the seed for the elements.
As is the seed, so is the fruit (tree).
Therefore, the world is nothing but Brahman the absolute."*

The 'Tree of Life' is a universal concept with each religion and culture portraying it in different ways. For Buddhists it represents the "still point of the turning world" beneath the Asvattha or Bodhi tree where the seated Buddha received enlightenment. The ancient Egyptians conceptualised it as a 'Celestial Tree' symbolizing eternal renewal in the after-world. A mystical link is also seen between the Crucifix or the 'Tree of Salvation', and the 'Tree of life', which grew alongside each other in the Garden of Eden. In the Dominican church of St. Nicola in Toruń, Poland, a fourteenth century sculpture "Crux Florida", presents the crucifix with twelve branches with leaves, each branch

featuring an apostle and quotations from the Bible. In Muslim cultures, this 'Tree' is seen in miniature paintings, and also on prayer rugs found in Iran, Turkey and the Middle East. The carved lattice window of the Sidi Sayyid Mosque in Ahmedabad, built in 1573, is an exquisite example in Indian art. The red sandstone trellis with intertwining trunks, a Date Palm, arabesque-like flowering creepers and foliage (20 ft x 16 ft), is said to have been made by forty-five artisans, taking six years to complete. In legends of the Kayan people of Sarawak in Malaysia, the 'Tree of Life' "*gives birth to the first man and woman when an Upperworld creeper impregnates an Underworld tree.*" The hornbill bird which is the celestial Upperworld counterpart to the Underworld 'Naga' or dragon goddess is usually perched at the top of the 'Tree of Life' motif, in artistic renditions.

Usage in Contemporary Design

Clearly, the 'Tree of Life' is rich in mystic and religious symbolism and has deep roots in many cultures, but what about its usage in contemporary times?

A marble replica of the carved screen at Sidi Sayyid Mosque was installed in the lobby of 'The Oberoi' hotel in New Delhi when it was built in the late 1960's, and where it remained up to April 2016 when renovation work began. The same *jaali* design in a graphic motif is the logo for IIM Ahmadabad and Asif Shaikh, a celebrated embroiderer, has created a miniature version, using miniscule stitches in *ari* embroidery. Even though one had seen this backlit *jaali* countless times at The Oberoi, there was no cognition of what it represented, more than a beautifully carved piece of marble. My first recall, on hearing about the 'Tree of Life' was at a fashion show at the Crafts Museum in New Delhi - an audio visual presentation showcasing India's textile craft heritage through a retrospective of Ritu Kumar's work, in the early 1990's.

Representations of trees and plant forms feature consistently in contemporary fashion. Their evocations of nature lend an interesting twist to the concept of 'Tree of Life' as consciousness from which the whole world emerges. Bai-Lou designs larger than life, flowing creepers into their signature hand-woven Jamdani sarees, delineating the munificence of the natural world. Known for their lush floral embroideries, Shalini Jaikaria of Geisha Designs says they are "*forever drawn to the garden, in all its moods*" and never tire of reinterpreting it for these motifs on their clothes "*are an acknowledgement and gratitude for the life of abundance we live in.*"

An abstract idea such as consciousness itself, portrayed through almost literal representations of tree and plant forms without any symbolical reference to the source that all life arises from, could well have evolved from early seventeenth century Chintz designs. Intended for Western markets these fabrics depicted fanciful plants and trees, drawing inspiration from Chinese porcelain designs. Interestingly, in Chinese mythology, the 'Tree of Life' is represented through a phoenix and a dragon, where the dragon represents immortality. In later Chintzes, these plant forms evolved into elaborate and exotic trees with birds, animals and even insects and could be the beginnings of a shift away from the reverence and symbolism that ancient cultures attributed to the Tree motif.

While Geisha Designs are romantic and optimistic, Sunita Shankar presents the 'Tree' motif as sparse. Working with Bandhini, she appears to question the concept of a world brimming forth with life from the essential 'Tree of Consciousness', because of her concerns regarding the sustainability of crafting traditions in a fast-paced digitized world. Her isolated trees stand as a reminder to re-look at restoring the balance of the eroding eco-system through an informed continuance of an ancient crafting heritage, which drew its sustenance rooted in the spiritual aspects of being.

Indian Traditions

In Indian traditions there are apparently many sacred tree icons from the mythical *Kalpavriksha* or Wishing Tree, *Chiravriksha* or Rag Tree and *Sthalvriksha* or Founding Temple trees as well as other sacred trees such as the *Pipal* and *Kadamba*. The *Jivanvriksha* or 'Tree of Life' is cited in many scriptures and in the Katha Upanishad it is "this eternal *Asvattha* whose roots rise on high and whose branches grow low is the pure, the Brahman, what is called Non-Death. All the worlds rest in it." The Banyan tree with its unique growth pattern of aerial roots growing downwards from its branches thus symbolises the eternal regeneration cycle of the universe. *Akshaya Vata*, or the 'Eternal Banyan Tree' located on the bank of the Yamuna, near the confluence of rivers in Allahabad, is said to have remained unaffected during the cyclic destruction of creation, Pralaya or the Great Deluge. According to legends, the infant Krishna rested on its leaves when all land was submerged and the immortal sage Markandeya received his cosmic vision beneath it. The Bodhi tree at Gaya is said to be a manifestation of this tree.

The 'Tree of life' is also equated with the 'Cosmic Tree', where it is said that Indra, propped up the sky with a cosmic pillar or a tree located at the centre of the primeval mountain, keeping heaven and earth apart so that life on earth may develop. The Lotus, which symbolizes spiritual realisation, as in the opening of the thousand petalled lotus of the *sahasrara* or crown chakra, is also used as a metaphor for the 'Tree of Life'. The idea of the cosmic pillar is also evident in shamanistic beliefs where their rites, myths and symbols of ascent revolve around the 'Tree of Ascent' or 'Cosmic Tree' - the point that links the planes of sky, earth and underworld, along the 'Axis Mundi' of the Tree.

Folk Art and Embroidery

I'm very partial to working with *Kantha*, especially the running stitch effect. In my research on this embroidery I came across an essay on 'The Depiction of Sacred Trees on the *Kanthas* of Bengal' where Paola Manfredi's tells us that trees, "a numinous manifestation, embodying Divine energies", dig their roots into the earth drawing up primordial creative fluids to reach into the sky, the abode of the Gods. And that the rippled effect of the *Kantha* running stitch work is a representation of cosmic vibrations. To find such deep symbolism attached to the humble running stitch enriches not just the doing but also one's appreciation of the complexity of thought and understanding that the women of Bengal were able to portray through their naïve pictorial quilts made from recycled cloth.

Another powerful folk depiction is a curious wall-hanging by Laxmi, Durgi and Sita, three Lambani from the Bellary district in Karnataka. In their presentation of the 'Tree' as half man, half woman, the left half is male, with stiff, rugged, unbending branches, and the right side as female, is soft and curvaceous, laden with flowers and fruit. Created under the auspices of Dastkar, this piece combines mirror-work, patchwork, shells, beads and coins with a variety of embroidery stitches to provide an insightful commentary about the nature of human beings as perceived by these non-literate rural women.

Regenerating Interest

In recent months there has been a lot of attention focussed on the 'Tree of Life' concept. It was presented at an exposition about the life and culture of the Parsi community where a life-sized carved tree was wrapped with the '*kusti*' which is a specially woven sacred thread worn by Parsis. The '*kusti*' is a symbolic "girdle of strength" and a direction finder, leading the wearers to discover their very own path through life. The 'Tree of Life' is not particularly cited in Parsi lore, but presenting the '*kusti*' in this way enlivens environmental concerns; becoming a cue to re-examine our notions of life, directing us beyond the physical to the deeper reaches of being.

Another exhibition at Bikaner House, New Delhi, showcased work from thirty countries including Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and India which depicted creative renditions of the 'Tree of Life'. 'Pohon Budi' presented traditional and contemporary expressions in textile, stone, ceramics, metal, glass, wood, paper, bead works and lacquer-ware demonstrating how significant this concept has been for people and cultures throughout the world.

Gopika Nath