

# tree talks

E.03

**Shaded Divinity**

Dr. Danister Perera

- [00:05] In celebration of the Lunuganga gardens 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, *Tree Talks* podcast explores the lives of flora and ecosystems within the gardens. Bought on the eve of independence in 1948, Lunuganga is Geoffrey Bawa's first and longest running architectural endeavour, join us as we unravel the intricacies of this living archive.
- [00:31] All transcripts, translations and supplementary guides for *Tree Talks* podcast episodes are available at the *To Lunuganga* and Geoffrey Bawa websites, links available in the show notes.
- [00:46] The *Moonamal* tree placed so meticulously on the crest of the Cinnamon Hill lawn draws one's eye from the Main House to the Dedduwa Lake. The Dedduwa lake is avowed for mystic folklore, most interestingly the lore of the spirit of a monk that resides abode a tree on the lake's Honduwa island. Stories passed down from generations can often have an interconnectedness with nature. In this episode, ayurvedic expert and cultural anthropologist, Dr. Danister Perera delves into the cultural and spiritual curiosities of trees like the *Moonamal*.

[01:30] My name is Danister Perera, I am an expert of intangible cultural heritage, specially, I work with people and areas where the traditional knowledge is very much prevailed and inactive, specially in the rural areas. My research area is very much focused on cultural and spiritual uses of plants and the traditional plant lore. Also, I work with some ancient manuscripts, where we can find many information about trees and their uses. As well as the people's knowledge, we call it ethnoscience.

[02:22] The trees are a part of cultural heritage, whether it is tangible or intangible. Because the tree is itself a physical object, it can be considered as tangible, but the trees will create the intangible heritage itself because the people who are living around the tree or the habitats, they create their cultural, intangible cultural heritage of some belief systems and the practices associated with this tangible cultural heritage.

[03:00] Today I'm going to speak about the cultural aspect of the trees, as well as the cultural, spiritual associations of trees. Now, we all know that trees are kind of an integral part of the society and the cultures and civilization for centuries. Traditionally we believe that trees have a kind of a heavenly connection to the tree deities, they are abodes of deities. Therefore we call them *ruk deviyo*, it's a kind of a tree deities. Therefore, people respect the trees as heavenly gifts. They are part of nature and they protect nature and sometimes the trees are called the sacred items of the nature. They are venerable, and they have some cultural and spiritual reasons for the people to respect the trees as sacred. People believe that the guardian deities live in sacred groves. Sacred groves are protected areas naturally and traditionally, and people have some restrictions and taboos before entering the sacred groves and they have some ethics to work with traditional groves or the sacred groves. People think that the forest area is protected by deities or heavenly forces, divine forces. Therefore some trees are prohibited to cut or exploit or even if you want to take or harvest a part of that tree, you have to take the permission from the deity which abides on the tree. Therefore, trees are historically respected by the people as sacred beings. Trees are a kind of a living beings, they treat the trees as living beings. Therefore, sometimes people used to talk to the trees, they used to think that trees are alive and trees can think and trees can bless. Trees are alive, therefore trees are a part of their lives.

[05:20] The people traditionally have their own ethics to select the trees for day-to-day uses. Now, for an example, there are some trees allocated for sacred things. We know astrologically there are nine planets. For the nine planets there are nine trees assigned. When we do the oil anointing ceremony for the [Sinhala & Tamil] New Year, we have seen that some herbal leaves are kept on your head as well as your feet. That is according to the planetary signs for the trees, each planet

[04:52] has a tree. Also, each moon mansion, there are twenty seven moon mansions, there are trees assigned for each moon mansion. We know there are some rituals where they use trees and part of trees to perform the ritual successfully.

[06:20] Again, we know that there are some legends associated with the trees, especially the origin of a tree. Now we have the traditional rituals where you have heard about the *pol upatha*, *bulath upatha* again *dehi upatha*, *tholabo upatha*, *upatha* means 'origin' then '*pol upatha*' means origin of coconut. And there's a story behind how the coconut originated in this world and there is always a heavenly or kind of a supra-human incident associated with this origination. Now for

an example, *bulath* or betel leaves are believed to have originated in *naga loka* or the world of cobra. Therefore it is called *ahi latha*, *ahi latha* means creeper of the snakes, 'Snake Creeper'. In that case, we can know the nomenclature of the trees also has a kind of a cultural dimension. Where when you name a tree, it has a meaning, it has a story, it has a legend behind that.

[07:34] Also, there are trees which are associated with religious beliefs. Now we know that the *Bo* tree is, we call it *Ficus religiosa* even in the name, the botanical name you can see the part of the botanical name is associated with the cultural aspect. *Ficus religiosa*, 'religiosa' means it is used in religions. Not only one religion, it is associated with Buddhism, Hinduism as well as Jainism also. The *Bo* tree or the sacred tree under which the Lord Buddha was enlightened is venerated for the past centuries where the *Bo* tree has become a symbol of blessing and protection. In that context, we can see there are many trees, especially the large trees are much respected by the cultures, we call them keystone species. Keystone species means they are very important culturally as well as in terms of biodiversity. These trees play a kind of a very critical role in conservation in natural habitats because one large tree is a micro-ecosystem which accommodates a kind of other small flora and fauna. It's a kind of a small micro ecosystem. If you see a very huge tree, on that tree you can find many other kinds of epiphytes and other plants, creepers as well as there are many animal species who are feeding on it, actually, birds and other animal species. Therefore these plants, these huge trees, are called the keystone species which play a kind of a very critical role in biodiversity conservation.

[09:23] There are some trees like *Rudraksha*, we see that it is called *Shiva Priya*. The name *Shivapriya*, *Shivapriya* is preferred by Shiva, Lord Shiva. This seed of the *Rudraksha* is very much respected and considered as having a kind of a very divine power in it. Therefore, there are many beliefs and many religions that are associated with this tree, just this one tree. In the same way for each tree we can find the cultural stories and religious and cultural practices associated with that one tree. Also, some trees are considered as a kind of a property of gods. Now for an example, *Beli* tree, the Bael tree, what we call Bilva. Bilva belongs to god Shiva and there are three leaves on one leaflet of *Beli*. It represents the *thrishula* of Shiva, the shape of the leaves. In the same way you can find for all trees people have their own interpretation, their own kind of a perception, cultural perception, related to the tree. The shape of the tree, sometimes the uses of the tree, sometimes the smell of the tree, flowers of the tree, for all the parts people have their own cultural description related to the tree. Again, I must highlight the biodiversity, trees are not only cultural, they're not only representing the cultural heritage but also they have a biodiversity context, which is very important. Therefore trees are a symbol of biocultural diversity, not only the cultural diversity, not only the biodiversity. It is a symbol of, heritage of biocultural diversity.

[11:32] [11:32] In another context, we also must know that there are some misidentifications of trees in cultural dimension. Best example is the *Sal* tree. If you see most of the areas, you find the *Sal* tree but instead of the *Sal* we have a tree called Cannonball tree, which is botanically called *Couroupita*, a South American species that had been introduced by British people in the late 18th century. Now it has become a sacred tree because of this misidentification. We call it *Sal* but real *Sal* is *Shorea robusta*. People still believe that this is the *Sal* tree, the Cannonball tree is the *Sal* tree because, one century ago this tree has been identified mistakenly as *Sal*. Therefore,

to have the correct cultural heritage or cultural wisdom is very important in association of trees because this knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation to have the intangible cultural heritage protected by the genuine transmission.

- [12:50] When I was going through the list of trees available in the Lunuganga area, I found the *Couroupita* or the cannonball tree. It is the tree which is misidentified as *Sal*. Therefore, I would propose that if you can introduce the real *Sal* tree, *Shorea robusta* to the garden, it's very important for the people to have a kind of a genuine idea about the *Sal* tree.
- [13:24] The *Moonamal* tree is one of the special trees available in Lunuganga garden and I heard that the *Moonamal* tree was very special because it was one of the main focuses of Mr. Geoffrey Bawa and he was very much interested about this *Moonamal* tree. *Moonamal* is called in Sanskrit *Bakula* tree, *Bakula* or *Wakula* tree. It is botanically known as *Mimusops elengi*. Culturally *Moonamal* is a sacred plant especially among Hindus, and it is mentioned in Sanskrit literature for its delicate and very fragrant flowers. Especially, if you go through the Buddhist literature and the Hindu literature, in the stories when they describe the forest areas, they always mention about *Bakula* tree or the *Moonamal* tree which is very glorious and very beautiful when it is flowering. It is a kind of a good plant to have in the garden from the ancient times. Therefore *Moonamal* or *Bakula* is a very important, culturally important plant where it is associated with literature as well as history.
- [14:46] It is associated with Krishna. Krishna is said to have been fascinated with milk maids of Vrindavan of the Yamuna bank; he was playing under a *Bakula* tree in the story. Therefore, it has become a kind of a sacred tree associated with Krishna also. Most of the Sanskrit literature, the poetic literature, the authors have described the *Bakula* tree or this *Moonamal* tree as a symbol of love and beauty because of the flowers, the beautiful flowers. You can find *Bakula* Tree in *Ramayana* as well as in *Mahabharata* as well as in other Buddhist literature such as *jataka* stories. In one context, *Bakula* or *Moonamal* is sacred to *trimurti*. *Trimurti* is Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshvara, it's a symbol of *trimurti*. The flowers of *Bakula* have a kind of a very sweet refreshing aroma. Therefore, it is attributed to its frequent mention in romantic contexts in ancient stories. Especially ancient Indian sages regarded these trees as a gift from god, then *Bakula* is a kind of heavenly gift to the forest. Again, *Bakula* trees are frequently found growing in the temple gardens. If you refer to the ancient books most of the time when it is describing the temple gardens, *Bakula* tree was a part of that.
- [16:24] The *Bakula* tree is prescribed to be planted on the right side of the house as an auspicious tree. Now we know that astrologically, there are auspicious trees to be planted on each direction of the house, also there are inauspicious trees. Therefore *Wakula* is one of the auspicious trees and should be planted at the entrance of the house on the right side. The right side means the male portion, therefore *Bakula* is a male plant, a masculine plant. Therefore the right side is dedicated to that plant for auspicious purposes.
- [17:04] Most of the sages in Indian literature, it is described that they were sitting in the gardens under the *Bakula* trees because their devotees came and listened to them under the shade of

*Bakula* trees. Therefore they think that the *Bakula* tree is giving a kind of a spiritual power by its shade, by its shelter. Naturally it is giving a kind of a spiritual harmony by the shelter. That's why the sages were preaching under the *Bakula* trees. The *Bakula* flowers being so aromatic were used in making soaps and fragrant things in ancient culture. Where the queens were very much attracted to, fascinated by this aroma and they used to have this kind of flowers in their bedrooms and other areas to make the area more fresh, refresh.

[18:07] Astrologically, we know that there are twenty seven moon mansions or nakshastras. *Bakula* belongs to the *Anura nakshastra*, astrologically. Then also in traditional *shanthikarma* healing, healing rituals in Sri Lanka we have one ritual called *asuekgebamal baliya*, *asu-ek* means 'eighty one', in that ritual you will find eighty one chambers. *Wakula* is used for that healing ritual. Also, the flowers of *Moonamal* are used when reciting *shantipaustika yantra* and then it is prescribed in various medicinal oils in traditional medicine.

[18:57] *Bakula* or sorry, I'm always saying *Bakula*, is the Sanskrit word for the *Moonamal*, *Bakula* or *Wakula*, sometimes it is mentioned as *Wakula*, *Bakula* and *Wakula* are similar words. Then, *Moonamal* is also having a medicinal effect. It is used in various medicinal preparations and in Hindu literature, it is one of the thirty six sacred trees. There are thirty six sacred trees in Hinduism, *Bakula* is one of them. There is a *tantra* called *Kubjika tantra*, *Kubjika tantra* prescribes *Bakula* for getting some kind of a spiritual power. *Kubjika* tantra is an Indian book where the people practise their spiritual development with some tantric practices where they use some flowers and fragrances and some kind of physical objects to reach the spiritual harmony. Then this *Bakula* is one of them, the physical items.

[20:06] The wood of *Moonamal* is used for sacred carvings and making the images of gods, we call it *prathima*. *Bakula* is one of the sacred woods used for creating these kinds of images. Then, *Bakula* or *Moonamal* is a kind of a *chethiya* tree, *chethiya* tree means, the trees which are venerated. Now, previously I said that there are some thirty six sacred trees in Hinduism and now these are called *chethiya* trees. *Chethiya* means 'chaithya' which are kind of a large trees you do some *poojas* for these trees to get the blessings from them. Like the *Bo* tree, we use *Bo*, *Nuga*, *Na* these kinds of large trees are called *chethiya* trees. The *Bakula* or *Moonamal* is also one of them. Then we have in our Sri Lankan tradition, *Bakula* or *Moonamal* is used for *Yama Devaraja Thailaya*, *Yama Devaraja Thailaya* is a medicinal oil, and the *Maha Theiyoru Thailaya*, *Maha Saraswati Thailaya*, and *Raja Sararwati Thailaya* these are the medicinal oils *Moonamal* is one of the ingredients of, these oils as well as in a *Henaraja Guliya*, is kind of a very powerful medicine we use *Moonamal* for that medicinal pill also.

[21:36] If you go to the literature, you can find *Moonamal*, the name *Moonamal* in many literature sources like *Ruwanmaliganduwa*, *Asadhrushshya Jathaka Kavya*, *Sinhala Bodhi Wanshaya*, *Sika Walanda Vinisa*, *Bodhiwansa Getapadaya*, *Visithuru Dasannaya*, *Jathaka Atuwa Getapadaya*, *Poojavaliya*, *Darmapdeepikava*, *Saddharmarathnawaliya*, *Dhalada Siritha*, *Kausilumina*, *Sinhala Jathaka Potha*, *Saddharmalankaraya*, *Saddharmarathnakaraya*, *Paravi Sandeshaya*, *Kowul Sandeshaya*, *Kahakurulu Sandeshaya*, *Maharoopa Siddisannaya*, *Rohoth Sanhinda*, *Narada Sanhitha*, and *Wasthu Rathnawaliya*. This is a kind of list of books where we can find *Moonamal*

as a name and its usages in literature. Therefore it's a very interesting and useful tree in our culture as well as in our traditional society in the villages and this is considered as a multi-purpose, multi use tree, for the people who have their own wisdom of using the natural plants for their day-to-day life.

[22:57] Therefore, it's very important to understand the relationship between these two, the connection between these two, the tangible and intangible. Because we cannot separate them and we cannot divide them and take them separately because they survive inter-dependently on each other.

[23:17] If you remove the object, the whole culture will be vanished. That is one of the very critical challenges we have in the current society, where we are facing so many problems due to the development interventions. Now with the development interventions where we don't have a sense of culture, sometimes the culture will be eroded by the development. Development has no sense of culture, it does not measure the impact, cultural impact. Now normally we know that most of the development projects, they do the 'environmental impact assessment' but they do not do the 'cultural impact assessment', they do not actually care about the culture, that is the reason.

[24:05] Normally in rural areas specially, all the villages, almost all the villages, all over the island, they have at least 10-15 big trees where they do some rituals and rites to the tree. Then removing that kind of cultural object may be having a very negative effect on the heritage. That is why we need to understand there is no division between tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, if we want to safeguard the tangible cultural heritage, we need to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage associated with it.

[24:49] Nature has created the ecosystems in a kind of a design which is created by nature itself. That's why human beings should be very careful when they do any kind of manipulation of nature without having a knowledge or proper understanding of the context, the natural context.

[25:11] Therefore we have to have a sense or cultural respect for the trees, we should promote that kind of respect to the trees. Therefore, that's why in ancient societies the green religions were very much practised by the people who were living with the forest. Green religions, they always respected the trees as living beings. They think trees also can think and trees can communicate with them. Therefore, sometimes people may think that it is a kind of obsolete idea and that the people should not worship trees and stones; it's a kind of a very primitive practice, but for me it's not a primitive practice.

[26:04] If you look at the modern or current practice of planting trees is a kind of a very artificial thing, sometimes we introduce some exotic species to nature. Therefore, we first need to understand our own nature and select the species very carefully which are suitable for that environment. We should not introduce strange species, we should introduce the species which can have an interconnection with other species.

[26:38] I think the concept which was practised by Geoffrey Bawa in his garden was very nature

friendly as I see the environment his object was to create a kind of a jungle environment. Jungle environment means, it's the natural environment where you will maintain the interconnection between the species. Do not forget that the trees are living beings.

[27:06] Therefore, having a kind of a community of trees in a garden is very important. Not just isolated trees here and there, but to have them together, it's very, very important to make a kind of a blessing environment where the trees are happy, do not forget that they also have feelings. Therefore, if you let them have their own interactions among them, then they will be happy. If you make the environment happy, then the environment will bless you. Therefore, living with nature, living with trees, living with the environment is an art. You should know the art, where first you must accept the trees as living beings, then you must respect their standards of living.

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