



INTERFAITH
RAINFOREST
INITIATIVE

A HINDU TOOLKIT ON FOREST PROTECTION

RESOURCES FOR RELIGIOUS
LEADERS AND FAITH COMMUNITIES

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is part of a series developed by the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative meant to inform and inspire faith communities to action to help safeguard tropical forests and their inhabitants. The Initiative believes the time has come for a worldwide movement for the care of tropical forests, one that is grounded in the inherent value of forests, and inspired by the values, ethics, and moral guidance of indigenous peoples and faith communities.

This Hindu Toolkit presents a series of reflections, meditations, prayers, talking points, and lesson plans aimed at Hindu practitioners, and assembled with the help of Allegra Lovejoy Wiprud and Christopher Fici. It is not meant to be exhaustive or final, but represents a living document that can evolve over time with the help and for the benefit of faith communities.

INTERFAITH RAINFOREST INITIATIVE

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is an international, multi-faith alliance that is working to bring moral urgency and faith-based leadership to efforts to end tropical deforestation. It is a platform for religious leaders and faith communities to work hand-in-hand with indigenous peoples, governments, NGOs and businesses on actions that protect rainforest and the rights of those that serve as their guardians.

QUESTIONS?

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is eager to work with you to protect tropical forests and the rights of indigenous peoples. Contact us at info@interfaithrainforest.org.

PARTNERS

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative welcomes engagement by all organizations, institutions and individuals of good faith and conscience that are committed to the protection, restoration and sustainable management of rainforests.



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OPENING REFLECTION

THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT AS BHAKTI: AN EXAMPLE FOR RAINFOREST ACTION TODAY?

By Christopher Fici

Invocation

Om bhur bhuva suvah
Tat savitur varenyam
Bhargo devasya dhimahi
Dhiyo yo nah prachodayatah
Om shanti shanti shantih
Om Samudra vasane devi
Parvata sthana mandite
Vishnu-patni namastubhyam
Pada sparsham kshanmasva me

“Let us meditate on Isvara: who has created the Universe, who is fit to be worshipped,
who is the remover of all sins and ignorance. May Isvara enlighten our intellect.

We bow to Mother Earth, whose body is the mountains and whose garments are the oceans.
O consort of Sri Vishnu, please forgive us for touching your body with our feet.”
(Translation adapted from Swami Sivananda)

O Mother Earth, may Your hills and snowy mountains cool us and may Your forests delight us; You of many
colors, of the rivers, mountains, and flowers are firm and strong like Dhruva and Indra; I stand firm and
whole on Your unconquerable foundation.

From the center of the Earth, like a navel, emanates Her vital power;
As Your children, fill us and purify us with that power;
And may we be filled with the vital power of the rains.
The Earth Herself is the altar in which all activities are a sacred sacrifice;
All the sounds of the Earth are the sacred chants which purify all beings;
May this expansive Earth expand our consciousness.
(Bhumii Sukta-Hymn to the Earth)

vidyā-vinaya-sampanne
brāhmaṇe gavi hastini
śuni caiva śva-pāke ca
paṇḍitāḥ sama-darśinaḥ

The humble sages, by virtue of true knowledge, see with equal vision a learned
and gentle brāhmaṇa, a cow, an elephant, a dog and one who has been outcaste.
(Bhagavad Gita 5:18)

“We wanted to make the people understand that our existence is tied with the forests...This forest is our mother’s home: we will protect it with all of our might.” So said Gaura Devi, the servant-leader of the village women’s organization in Reni village in the Indian state of Rajasthan in early 1974. At that time, loggers under the authority and contract of the Rajasthan state government moved into the village to chop down the trees the village depended on for their material and cultural livelihood. Hearing that the loggers were arriving, Gaura Devi organized the women of the village to come and protect their beloved forest. Meeting the loggers, the women resisted them by engaging in chipko: hugging of the trees to honor and protect them. Their Earthy and Earthly sacred act of civil disobedience prevented the loggers from taking these trees, who were family to the villagers and fellow devotees of the Divine. They were an essential element of the material and spiritual flourishing of Reni village and of so many of their fellow indigenous peoples of India.

To be called a tree-hugger is often derogatory: you might be too “organic” or hippie-like to be taken seriously; hardly the type to “succeed” in the fast-paced, turbo-capitalist world of today. What the deriders of the tree-huggers do not understand is that the act of chipko—the act of tree-hugging—is a most radical act of bhakti, the yoga of selfless love and devotion. The women of the Chipko movement were ready to spill their own blood to protect these trees, who were their mothers, brothers, and sisters.

The forest-dwelling villagers of the Chipko movement were the spiritual descendants of the Bishnoi community in Rajasthan. In 1730, 363 Bishnois engaging in chipko resistance were murdered by the soldiers of the local king of Jodhpur, who had come to harvest timber. When the king learned of the massacre, he personally went to apologize to the Bishnois and promised never to cut wood from their forest again.

Chipko, tree-hugging, is not merely a romantic act of environmentalism, something to do in our spare time to make us feel more green. To engage in chipko, or in any act of dharma which is in the spirit of chipko, is to engage in acts of bhakti, or devotion, which encompass a selflessness, humility, and fierceness that transcends everything that keeps us separate from each other. To engage in chipko is to identify one’s own sacredness with the sacredness of all other living beings. To engage in chipko is to have sama-darsinah vision: seeing and experiencing all living beings as sacred children of the Divine, so that we become their fierce lovers and protectors at all times and in all circumstances.

To engage in chipko is not to be free of the tragedies which accompany such resistance. The Bishnoi villagers who fell at the swords of the soldiers of the king of Jodhpur share and echo the pain of the villagers of Reni, whose initial chipko resistance only ended up delaying, over the course of the next few years and decades, the inevitable logging of their forests. Today, numerous forest-dwelling communities in India, known as adivasi, face constant pressure to give up their sacred lands. These pressures come from logging and mining companies, as well as from the developers of massive hydroelectric dams. The Indian state and national governments support these “development” measures in the name of economic progress, despite legal protection mechanisms such as the Forest Rights Act, that should protect the trees. In 2010 the Indian Supreme Court approved the evictions of over 1 million forest-dwellers in 17 Indian states after their claims for indigeneity were rejected under the diluted legal protections of the Forest Rights Act. (Tanay Gandhi, “The Supreme Court Sends Forest Rights Back to a Dark Past,” *The Wire*, published Feb 25, 2019, accessed at <https://thewire.in/environment/supreme-court-forest-rights-act-colonialism-encroachment>.)

So is the practice of chipko useless in the face of such continual tragedy and struggle?

Because the practice of chipko is a practice of bhakti, it contains and holds the pain produced by tragedy and struggle, while the ever-present seed of hope and courage is always germinating alongside it. Consider this uncanny definition of bhakti from the eminent Indian poet, philosopher, and litterateur A.K. Ramanujan. He describes bhakti as that which “is necessarily anti-structure...unmaking, undoing, the man-made. It is an act of violation against ordinary expected loyalties, a breakdown of the predictable and the secure...The Lord is the Illicit Lover; He will break up the world of Karma and normal relationships.” (A.K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), 51.) To practice bhakti in the face of tragedy, hopelessness, and grief is to refuse to surrender in the face of defeat. The sacred tree-huggers of the Chipko and Bishnoi movements give us an eternally fresh model of fierce devotion which we can constantly draw upon in our sacred fight to protect sacred rainforests across Earth.

To practice chipko as a practice of bhakti is to make a clear claim: we refuse everything which unmakes, which undoes, which violates the sanctity of Earth’s rainforests and the communities which are in symbiotic relationship with these forests. To practice chipko as a practice of bhakti is to remake, restore, and regenerate our sacred relationship with the rainforests who practice bhakti with us.

Hindu traditions are rich with teachings that point us to the sacred personhood of all living beings. Krishna teaches in the Bhagavad-Gita: *avināsi tu tad viddhi/yena sarvam idaṁ tatam/vināśam avyayasyāsyā/na kaścit kartum arhati*. That which pervades the entire body you should know to be indestructible. No one is able to destroy that imperishable soul. (2:17) Pervading the body of every living being, including and especially the trees of the rainforest, is the *jiva*, the eternal individual spirit-soul who is beloved by the Divine. To see and relate to every living being with *sama-darsinah* vision is to see and relate to them with an intimate, personal love. This intimate, personal love leads one to the practice of chipko.

The trees of the rainforest are understood to be companions in devotion, as fellow devotees and as personal manifestations of Divinity. The Hindu scholar/practitioner David Haberman, speaking particularly of the majestic banyan trees of India’s forests, tells us that for many Hindus, all trees are “considered to be a powerful animate being...deeply rooted in the source of all life that humans seek connection with, depend on, and receive blessings from. Trees in general are associated with the very wellspring of life’s vitality, and banyan trees in particular are considered to be an embodiment of ever-lasting life that continuously renews itself...Notions of immortality worldwide, then, are often closely linked with trees. Immortality, or at least longevity, is commonly sought in India at the foot of a tree—and most likely in the shelter of a banyan tree.” (David L. Haberman, *People Trees: Worship of Trees in North India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 168).

Many forest-dwellers in India experience the trees of the rainforest as the personification of the great divinities Shiva or Vishnu. Often you will find at the foot of a tree an array of divinities: Kali, Durga, Hanuman, Ganesha, and Radha-Krishna, as the tree herself is the temple which holds intimately close all of these divinities in her roots, branches, leaves, fruits, and flowers.

The women in the villages of Reni and in the Bishnoi community who were prepared to give their lives for the protection of their beloved trees understood, on a deep instinctual and spiritual level, that the best hope for the protection and restoration of rainforests comes from the intimacy of our loving embrace and entanglement with the branches, roots, leaves, fruits and flowers that give us life.

To practice dharma as a Hindu is to cherish, nourish, and protect the sanctity of all living beings, fiercely and without cheap grace and cheap compromise. All living beings are sacred because life is sacred. The Hindu theologian Anantanand Rambachan teaches that “the unity of creation that has its source in the divine and which is pervaded by the divine implies a deep interconnectedness and interdependence. The same truth is implied by understanding the world to be the body of the divine.... Hindu traditions emphasize that our bodies are inseparable from and deeply connected to the natural world. The wind that is described as the breath of God is our breath. Through science, we understand the indispensability of our rainforests for the health of our planet’s atmosphere, climate and to its overall flourishing. The core Hindu teaching on the unity of existence is also a warning that in destroying the rainforests, we destroy ourselves.” (Anantanand Rambachan, “Protecting Rainforests as a Hindu Religious Obligation”).

We cherish and honor our brothers and sisters in chipko by embodying their resistance against this destruction intimately in our own bodies and in our communities. When we embrace our brother and sister trees, we discover an intimate connection of devotion which gives renewed courage and compassion for active and creative anticipation of a more Earth-honoring world. Chipko is always there for us. Bhakti is always part of our deepest, most intimate sense of self.

TALKING POINTS

- 1. Dharma as protecting all living beings.** To practice dharma as a Hindu is to cherish, nourish, and protect the sanctity of all living beings. All living beings are sacred because life is sacred. Among the numerous creative ways Hindus can define dharma and describe its practice, Earth-honoring and Earth-devoted practices offer unique insights into how to live dharmically. The women in Chipko movement and in the Bishnoi community, who were prepared to give their very lives for the protection of their beloved trees, understood this dharma on a deep instinctual and spiritual level.
- 2. The Divine in Earth's creation.** In the Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna, considered by many Hindus to be the supreme personal manifestation of the Divine, says that “of lights, I am the radiant sun...among stars I am the moon...of bodies of water I am the ocean...of all trees I am the banyan tree...among beasts I am the lion...of purifiers I am the wind...of fishes I am the shark...and of flowing rivers I am the Ganges.” (Bhagavad-Gita 10:21-10:31). Krishna identifies his personal divinity with what is most beautiful, awe-inspiring, intense, and life-giving in the ecology of Earth's creation. Devotees of the Divine are encouraged to encounter the personal presence and energy of the Divine in their fellow Earthly creatures and in the elements and energies of Earth. This can inspire Hindus to better protect creation through experiences of love and devotion. It can also inspire Hindus to avoid a dualistic separation of the spiritual presence and energy of the Divine from the material elements and energies of Earth.
- 3. Chipko is bhakti.** The act of chipko, the act of tree-hugging, is a most radical act of bhakti, of the yoga of selfless love and devotion. Because the practice of chipko is a practice of bhakti, it contains the pain produced by tragedy and struggle, as well as the seed of hope and courage. To practice bhakti in the face of tragedy, hopelessness, and grief is to refuse to surrender in the face of defeat. The sacred tree-huggers of the Chipko and Bishnoi movements give us a model of fierce devotion which we can continually draw upon in the fight to protect sacred rainforests in India and across Earth.
- 4. Trees manifest the Divine.** The trees of the rainforest are understood to be companions in devotion, as fellow devotees and as personal manifestations of Divinity. Trees in general are associated with the very wellspring of life's vitality, and banyan trees in particular are considered to be an embodiment of ever-lasting life that continuously renews itself.
- 5. The world is the body of the Divine.** The Hindu theologian Anantanand Rambachan teaches that “the unity of creation that has its source in the divine and which is pervaded by the divine implies a deep interconnectedness and interdependence. The same truth is implied by understanding the world to be the body of the divine...Hindu traditions emphasize that our bodies are inseparable from and deeply connected to the natural world. Through science, we understand the indispensability of our rainforests for the health of our planet's atmosphere, climate and to its overall flourishing. The core Hindu teaching on the unity of existence is also a warning that in destroying the rainforests, we destroy ourselves.” (Anantanand Rambachan, “Protecting Rainforests as a Hindu Religions Obligation”).

PRAYERS AND MEDITATIONS

HINDU PRAYERS AND RITUALS IN HONOR OF FORESTS, FOREST PEOPLES, AND THEIR PROTECTION

The Divine Is Present in the Forest

As Hindus, we recognize that the divine is present in this world – especially in the forests. By recalling the Divine Beloved’s presence in the forests, we remember to treat them with reverence and care. We also stand in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples who revere their forests, the source of life.

Sri Krishna reveals to Arjuna that the potency of all things spiritual and material come from Him:

Of all that is material and all that is spiritual in this world, know for certain that I am both the origin and the dissolution.

O conqueror of wealth, there is no truth superior to Me.
Everything rests upon Me, as pearls are strung on a thread.
O son of Kunti, I am the taste of water, the light of the sun and the moon,
the syllable Om in the Vedic mantras; I am the sound in ether and ability in man.
I am the original fragrance of the earth, and I am the heat in fire.
I am the life of all that lives, and I am the penances of all ascetics.
O son of Pritha, know that I am the original seed of all existences,
the intelligence of the intelligent, and the prowess of the powerful. — BG 7.6-10

Sri Krishna identifies Himself with the peepal tree:

Of trees, I am Ashvattha; I am Narada among divine seers;
Of gandharvas, I am Chitraratha; I am sage Kapila among siddhas. — BG 10.26
O Ashvattha, I honor you, King of Trees, who are the residence of sacrificial fire
and the perpetual abode of Govinda. May you remove all my misfortunes. — unknown shloka

Ethical Leadership Awakens the Abundance of the Earth

Countless stories in Hindu scriptures reiterate the importance of ethical leadership for the flourishing of both people and planet. These are often paired with cautionary tales of the impact of poor leadership upon both.

Forest-dwelling sages express gratitude to Sri Krishna for bestowing abundance on the Earth:

इमे जनपदाः सवृद्धाः सुपक्वौषधविरुधः
वनाद्गन्निद्युदन्वन्तो ह्येधन्ते तव वीक्षितैः ॥ १.८.४० ॥

All these cities and villages are flourishing in all respects because the herbs and grains are in abundance, the trees are full of fruits, the rivers are flowing, the hills are full of minerals and the oceans full of wealth. And this is all due to Your glancing over them. — SB 1.8.40

The Earth speaks to King Prithu, explaining the exploitation she has experienced:

अपालतिनादृता च भवद्भरिलोकपालकैः
चोरीभूतेऽथ लोकेऽहं यज्ज्वारथेऽग्रसमोषधीः ॥ ४.१८.७ ॥

O King, I am unable to provide for the people of the world because the leaders are not protecting me from the reckless people exploiting me. I am hiding away my healing powers until I am properly protected. — SB 4.18.7

वत्सं कल्पय मे वीर येनाहं वत्सला तव
धोक्ष्ये क्षीरमयान्कामाननुरूपं च दोहनम् ॥ ४.१८.९ ॥
दोग्धारं च महाबाहो भूतानां भूतभावन
अन्नमीप्सतिमूर्जस्वद्भगवान्वाञ्छते यद्दि ॥ ४.१८.१० ॥

O King, if you wish to provide for the people, you must treat Me with love and protect Me. Only those who treat Me with love and gratitude, like a calf towards its mother, can receive My nourishment. Bring to Me those who truly love Me and who can truly honor My gifts. — SB 4.18.9-10

Bhumi Sukta: Prayer to the Earth

This Vedic prayer recognizes the life-giving power of the Earth, abode of all life.

सत्यं बृहदृतमुग्रं दीक्षा तपो ब्रह्म यज्ञः पृथिवीं धारयन्ती
सा नो भूतस्य भव्यस्य पत्न्युरुं लोकं पृथिवी नः कृणोतु ॥१॥

Salutations to Mother Earth, who has nourished in Her bosom those who have sustained Her through living in truth, in sacrifice and dedication;

May She, who witnesses both past and future, expand our inner life in this world towards the cosmic life.

असंबाधं बध्यतो मानवानां यस्या उद्वतः प्रवतः समं बहु ।
नानावीर्या ओषधीर्या बभिरत्तपृथिवी नः प्रथतां राध्यतां नः ॥२॥

She extends unimpeded freedom across her mountains, slopes, and plains;
May She who provides powerful herbs bestow Her health-giving riches upon us.

यस्यां समुद्र उत सन्धुरापो यस्यामन्नं कृष्टयः संबभूवुः ।
यस्यामदिं जनिवत्पिराणदेजत्सा नो भूमिः पूर्वपेये दधातु ॥३॥

She carries the interweaving of oceans and rivers and offers food when ploughed;

She indeed is the life of all lives; may She bestow us with that life.

यस्याश्चतस्रः प्रदशिः पृथिव्या यस्यामन्नं कृष्टयः संबभूवुः ।
या बभिरत्तबिहुधा प्राणदेजत्सा नो भूमरिगोष्वप्यन्ने दधातु ॥४॥

In Her the four directions reside; in Her is contained the food which She offers when ploughed,
She sustains the life of all lives; may She bestow on that life in food.

यस्यां पूर्वे पूर्वजना वचिक्ररि यस्यां देवा असुरानभ्यवर्तयन् ।
गवामश्वानां वयसश्च वषिठा भगं वर्यः पृथिवी नो दधातु ॥५॥

On this Earth our ancestors lived;
on this Earth the Devas overcame the Asuras;
On this Earth lived the cows, horses, birds,
and other animals; may this Mother Earth maintain us in prosperity.

वश्वंभरा वसुधानी प्रतषिठा हरिण्यवक्षा जगतो नविशनी ।
वैश्वानरं बभ्रिती भूमरिग्नमिन्द्रऋषभा द्रवणि नो दधातु ॥६॥

यां रक्षन्त्यस्वप्ना वश्विदानीं देवा भूमिपृथिवीमप्रमादम् ।
सा नो मधु प्रयिं दुहामथो उक्षतु वर्चसा ॥७॥

यार्णवेऽधिसिलिमग्न आसीद्यां मायाभरिन्वचरन्मनीषणिः ।
यस्या हृदयं परमे व्योमन्त्सत्येनावृतममृतं पृथिव्याः ।
सा नो भूमस्त्वषिबिलं राषट्रे दधातूत्तमे ॥८॥

यस्यामापः परचिराः समानीरहोरात्रे अप्रमादं कषरन्ती ।
सा नो भूमरिभूरधारा पयो दुहामथो उक्षतु वर्चसा ॥९॥

यामश्वनिावममातां वषिणुर्यस्यां वचिक्रमे ।
इन्द्रो यां चक्र आत्मनेऽनमतिरां शचीपतिः ।
सा नो भूमरिस्सृजतां माता पुत्राय मे पयः ॥१०॥

गरियस्ते पर्वता हमिवन्तोऽरण्यं ते पृथविस्स्योनमसतु ।
बभ्रुं कृष्णां रोहिणीं वश्विपूर्णां ध्रुवां भूमिपृथिवीमिन्द्रगुप्ताम् ।
अजीतेऽहतो अकषतोऽध्यष्ठां पृथिवीमहम् ॥११॥

यत्ते मध्यं पृथवि यिद्य नभ्यं यासत ऊर्जस्तन्वः संबभूवुः ।
तासु नो धेह्यभनिः पवस्व माता भूमिः पुत्रो अहं पृथिव्याः ।
परजन्यः पति स उ नः पपिरतु ॥१२॥

She is the foundation of all, the source of all wealth,
the golden one, and the home of all that live;

She bears the universal fire which empowers even
Indra and Rishabh; may this Mother Earth maintain
us with the splendor of this eternal fire.

The Devas protect the
all-giving Mother Earth night and day;
May She provide for us the milk and
honey of such divinity.

When the sages sought to understand
Mother Earth who both sits above the sea and is
immersed in the waters of meditation, they found
that Her heart lies in the highest spiritual sky of
truth and immortality.

May this Mother Earth bestow her
vigor upon all our people.

In Her, the waters of life flow
on all sides, day and night;

May She nourish us with the milk of
abundance and moisten us with its splendor.

The Ashwins have filled Her with healing herbs and
Vishnu has imparted Her with Divine qualities;

Indra made Her free from enemies
and the friend of all; may she nurture us with
kindness like a mother to a son.

O Mother Earth, may Your hills and snowy mountains
cool us and may Your forests delight us;

You of many colors, of the rivers, mountains, and
flowers are firm and strong like Dhruva and Indra;

I stand firm and whole on
Your unconquerable foundation.

From the center of the Earth,
like a navel, emanates Her vital power;

As Your children,
fill us and purify us with that power;

And may we be filled
with the vital power of the rains.

यस्यां वेदपरिगृहणन्त भूम्यां यस्यां यज्जं तन्वते विश्वकर्माणः ।
यस्यां मीयन्ते स्वरवः पृथिव्यामूर्ध्वाः शुक्रा आहुत्याः पुरस्तात् ।
सा नो भूमिर्वर्धयद्वर्धमाना ॥१३॥

यो नो द्वेषत्पृथिवी यः पृतन्यादयोऽभदिसान्मनसा यो वधेन ।
तं नो भूमे रन्धय पूरवकृत्वरि ॥१४॥

त्वज्जातास्तवयि चिरन्तमिर्त्यासत्त्वं बभ्रुषा दिवपिदसत्त्वं चतुष्पदः ।
तवेमे पृथिविष्वच मानवा येभ्यो ज्योतरिमृतं मर्त्येभ्य उदयन्तसूर्यो
रश्मभिरितनोति ॥१५॥

ता नः प्रजाः सं दुहरतां समग्रा वाचो मधु पृथिवी धेहि मह्यम् ॥१६॥

वश्विस्त्वं मातरमोषधीनां ध्रुवां भूमिपृथिवीं धर्मणा धृताम् ।
श्रिं स्योनामनु चरेम वश्विहा ॥१७॥

महत्सधस्थं महती बभूवथि महान्वेग एजथुर्वेपथुष्टे ।
महांस्त्वेन्द्रो रक्षत्यप्रमादम् ।
सा नो भूमे प्र रोचय हरिण्यस्येव संदृशामि नो द्वक्षित कश्चन ॥१८॥

The Earth Herself is the altar
in which all activities are a sacred sacrifice;
All the sounds of the Earth
are the sacred chants which purify all beings;
May this expansive Earth expand our consciousness.

O Earth, subdue our enemies, those who hate or
attack us, as You have always done.

Salutations to the mountains and the trees, to the
creatures of the soil and the water, to the birds, to
the animals, and all mortal beings;
Borne by You, all of these beings are touched by the
rays of the rising sun, the essence of immortality.

May Your children receive the milk of Divine order
embodied in You through understanding the honey-
like mantras of the Vedas.

The life-giving herbs and plants are like
mothers themselves, growing on the Earth
sustained by Dharma and pervaded
everywhere by auspiciousness.

Great is the Earth in which we live together, mighty
is the force within Her;
Great is the God who protects her day and night;
May she make us shine like gold so that we may see
all beings with light and none with hate.

Lakshmi Puja

Worship of the Goddess Lakshmi invokes the abundance of the Earth and invokes the Divine Power that protects Her. Such pujas may be conducted on special occasions in the rainforest, or anywhere on the Earth in solidarity. A sample puja may be found in How to Conduct Puja by Dr. A. V. Srinivasan.

LESSON PLAN

A LESSON PLAN FOR HINDU GROUPS IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE PEOPLES OF THE TROPICAL RAINFORESTS

By Allegra Lovejoy

Aimed for a young adult to adult audience; approximately 45-50 minutes.

Invocation (5 minutes)

We begin with an invocation to invoke the element of sattva and bring our minds together as one, in presence and gratitude. (Participants may be invited to keep their eyes closed in contemplation while a translation is read.)

Om bhur bhuvah suvah	Om samudra vasane devi
Tat savitur varenyam	Parvata sthana mandite
Bhargo devasya dhimahi	Vishnu-patni namastubhyam
Dhiyo yo nah prachodayatah	Pada sparsham kshanmasva me
Om shanti shanti shantih	

“Let us meditate on Isvara: who has created the Universe, who is fit to be worshipped, who is the remover of all sins and ignorance. May Isvara enlighten our intellect.”

“We bow to Mother Earth, whose body is the mountains and whose garments are the oceans. O consort of Sri Vishnu, please forgive us for touching your body with our feet.”

— Translation adapted from Swami Sivananda

Introduction (10 minutes)

If the group is large (more than ~10 people), introductions may be done in pairs or in small groups.

Invite participants to introduce themselves, and ask each to share a memory or reflection about what they were taught growing up - or what they observed - about the value of trees or forests.

Overview (10 minutes)

To be delivered by the facilitator:

Today we are discussing the threats facing the tropical rainforests of Brazil, Peru, the Congo, and Indonesia, and threats facing the indigenous peoples of these forests. Although we may be far from these forests, we remember that we are not different from these communities. Forest life is an integral part of Hindu life, historically, spiritually, and today – in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Guyana, and many other places. Even those whose lives are no longer tied to the forests share a spiritual and cultural legacy with communities who do.

Hindu communities are intimately interwoven, historically and spiritually, with the forests that surround them. All across India and other predominantly Hindu regions, villages have historically relied on the surrounding forests for food and fruits, timber, grazing, water conservation, and interactions with spirits, ancestors, and gods. Villages and leaders knew that it was important to protect those forests to ensure the sustenance of life—for people, for the beings that inhabit the forests, and for future generations. As the forest provides for the life of the community, the community reciprocates by protecting the forest.

The importance of trees and forests has been reinforced through both cultural practices and religious teachings. For example, the Matsya Purana includes a verse stating: “A pond is equal to ten wells; ten ponds are equal to ten lakes; ten lakes are equal to one child; and ten children are equal to one tree.” (Matsya Purana 59.17-20 in David Haberman, *People Trees*, 51.) Similar aphorisms and stories appear throughout Hindu scriptures, often manifest in cultural traditions such as the worship of trees or their conservation. The 15th-century Rajasthani guru Jambhesvara is believed to have taught, “humans will have to sustain the environment around them in order for nature to sustain humans.” His followers, including the Bishnoi people, had deep personal relationships with their village forests, including a prohibition on the cutting of any living tree. (Pankaj Jain, *Dharma and the Ecology of Hindu Communities* (Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), p. 57.)

As in the rainforests around the world, forests in India and the communities that rely on them—including tribal communities—face increasing challenges today of land degradation, land loss, conflict over land rights, water shortages, and economic disincentives. Communities have frequently come together to protect the forests that sustain them, notably through the Chipko Movement and others.

The Chipko Movement was a 1970s grassroots movement in which villagers of Uttarakhand resisted logging in the village forests by literally embracing the trees. Although initially led by women, some of the men who participated in the Chipko movement have continued to lead conservation and afforestation efforts across India. The Chipko Movement drew on a long legacy of village forest protection, both for material and spiritual sustenance. Notably, the 18th-Century Bishnoi community in Rajasthan literally sacrificed their lives to protect their trees from the axe. Amrita Devi, the first villager to step forward to protect her beloved tree, famously spoke the words that would be her last: “A chopped head is worth less than a felled tree.” (Thomas Weber, *Hugging Trees: The Story of the Chipko Movement* (New Delhi: Viking, Penguin Books, 1988), p. 92.)

If internet/video is available, the group can watch this 9-minute video about the legacy of the Chipko Movement in India, produced by journalists from DownToEarth. <https://youtu.be/qAvep2UTD6E> (English and Hindi)

The group may continue to discussion questions with or without video.

Small-Group Discussion Questions (10 minutes)

Break into groups of 2-4 people to discuss the following questions:

1. What motivated the village communities in the Bishnoi and Chipko cases to protect the forests? What spiritual, ecological, and practical motivations existed for them?
2. Why do you think the loggers killed the trees (and people) in the Bishnoi case, but not in the Chipko case? Do you think these factors might exist in deforestation situations today?

In Solidarity (15 minutes)

The forests of the Neotropics, of Indonesia, and central Africa face similar challenges. These rainforests are home to the greatest concentrations of biodiversity in the world and together supply more than 20% of the planet's oxygen and freshwater. Indigenous communities, often sharing a cosmivision similar to that of traditional Hindu communities, depend on these forests for sustenance, for their culture and way of life, and for spiritual wholeness. Yet ranching, agriculture, mining, and other extractive industries—as well as urban sprawl—eat into the forests every day. As in India, land rights of indigenous and tribal communities are uncertain, as is the protection of a clean and safe forest environment. Remembering our own legacy as peoples of forests and rivers, Hindus, no matter where we are in the world today, can stand in solidarity with the peoples of the tropical rainforests for the protection of forests and the rights of indigenous peoples.

If internet/video is available, the group can watch one or both educational videos. If unavailable, the group can read a printout of this article (<https://www.pachamama.org/achuar>) or others from the Resource Guide.

1. A 3-minute video about the Achuar people of Peru, produced by the NGO AmazonWatch <https://youtu.be/82whqhMcmcs> (English and Spanish)
2. A 3-minute video about the Saraguru people of Ecuador's fight against oil drilling in the forest, produced by the NGO AmazonWatch https://youtu.be/_sRDxXWkCnM (English and Spanish)

Discussion Questions (10 minutes)

Break into groups of 2-4 people to discuss the following questions:

1. What similarities do you see between the struggle of these communities and the struggles of Hindu village and forest communities?
2. If Hindus love and revere our Mother Earth, do we have a responsibility to protect or restore ecosystems? What could that responsibility look like?

Closing Prayer

A common closing prayer for Hindu gatherings, this prayer affirms the wholeness of life, the presence of the Divine in all things, and the wholeness of what was received in the lesson.

Om purnam idam purnam idah
Purnat purnam udacyate
Purnasya purnamadayah
Purnam eva vasisyate
Om shanti shanti shantih



INTERFAITH
RAINFOREST
INITIATIVE

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