



## The People Who Hugged the Trees

*Bishnoi (Hinduism)*

A long time ago, in a village in northern India, in Rajasthan, lived a young woman named Amrita Devi, who loved trees. Her village was on the borders of the Thar desert, but it was protected from the harshness of the desert by a small forest that surrounded the houses and guarded a small well from which the whole community drank.

As a child, her elders had taught her that trees were essential for the survival of the people, that they protected the village from sandstorms, refreshed the environment and provided food for both livestock and people. So, Amrita grew up contemplating the trees as a part of herself, without whom she could not live. Each morning she went to the largest tree in the forest, which she considered to be the mother of them all, and, hugging her rough trunk, she would say:

‘Mother Tree, you are so tall and so beautiful! How could we live without you and your brothers and sisters? You protect us, you feed us, you give us the breath of life. Mother Tree, teach me to have your strength so I can protect you.’

And, every time a breeze stirred in her leaves as if she was recognising Amrita’s words and Amrita felt heard by the tree.

Time passed and Amrita got married and had children. When they were old enough to understand, Amrita took them to the forest to instruct them in what she knew.

‘All these are your sisters and brothers,’ she said, extending her hand in a circle around her. ‘They give us shade and cool the village.’

They protect us from sandstorms and feed us. While they surround us, we will not lack for water.'

And then she taught them to hug the trees, to feel the pulse of their life, to feel the love with which they transmitted their strength.

But one day, while Amrita was with her tree, she saw a contingent of soldiers armed with axes arrive on horseback. She addressed the leader of the troop:

'Can I ask, sir, where are you going? Do you need water for your soldiers or for your horses? I can take you to the well of my village.'

But the captain replied in a contemptuous tone:

'We do not need anything from you.' And he added, addressing his soldiers, 'Chop down all the trees you find. The Maharajah will be happy if we bring him a good supply of firewood to make lime for the the new palace.'

Amrita felt her heart compress, as if a steel claw were squeezing it.

'No, sir, you cannot do that!' she cried, not caring what his reaction might be. 'Without the forest, our people will die! We will run out of water! Sandstorms will cover us! Our animals will not have anything to eat, neither will we!'

But the captain ignored her pleas. Riding out in front of her, he pointed his sword at the Mother Tree and shouted:

'Start with that one!'

'Don't chop down that tree!' Amrita shouted running over to cover the trunk with her body as a soldier, bearing an ax, headed towards her.

'Get out of here!' shouted the soldier.

'Please, sir,' she pleaded to the captain, 'Do not cut down this tree. She is the mother of all the trees in this forest. You will have to kill me before I will let you kill her.'

Amrita hugged the Mother Tree with all her soul, closing her eyes against the possibility of receiving a fatal blow. But the soldier, not wanting to shed the blood of a beautiful young woman, shoved her aside, swung the ax, and plunged its blade deep into the trunk.

‘Noooo!’ Amrita shouted in horror, raising her hands to her head, but she could do nothing to stop the men and soon the mother tree lay in agony on the ground.

Amrita hugged the tree’s stump. With tears in her eyes, she said:

‘I did not know how to protect you! Forgive me! I did not know how to protect you!’

But her cries had been heard in the village and, soon after, women, men, girls, boys and the elderly came to Amrita’s side. As they realised what was happening, one after another they went to a tree and hugged it. Each time the captain pointed to a tree, two or three villagers rushed quickly to cover the trunk with their bodies.

The captain, seeing that continuing with his mission would mean a massacre, something that perhaps the Maharajah would reproach him with upon his return, said:

‘Well! You have won ... but only for the moment, for the Maharajah will know about your insurrection.’

He sheathed his sword and raised his voice to order his men:

‘Keep your axes and mount. We’re leaving ... for now,’ he added, glaring at the people from the village.

When the Maharajah discovered what had happened, he became enraged. He ordered the troops to remain mounted, demanded that his horse and his battle sword be brought to him and departed at the head of that small army of lumberjack soldiers.

When they arrived at the village, he found everyone gathered around the well. They were all afraid, but they knew that they could not retreat before the menacing presence of those men, even though the Maharajah himself led them.

‘How dare you challenge my commands?’ shouted the Maharajah, glaring at the humble people with eyes like steel.

Nobody dared to speak, lest the furious man cut their heads off. No one but Amrita, who took a step forward, and said, with tears still in her eyes:

‘Sir, my neighbours are not to blame.’ She stared straight into his eyes, feeling liberated from all fear over what fate might bring. ‘I was the one who forced them to protect the trees. They came to my side, when they heard my screams.’

The Maharajah looked with amazement at the young woman. Her courage and serenity, despite her obvious sadness, surprised him greatly.

‘Great sir,’ Amrita continued, ‘these trees which surround us allow us to live. Without them, the well will run out of water, and there will be no food for our cattle and for ourselves. Without their shade, the heat in the village will become unbearable, and without the protection of their branches and leaves, sandstorms will cover our homes, burying us alive.’

Lowering her voice and her eyes, knowing that to say this could mean that her head would be severed from her neck, she added:

‘Is that what you want for your people?’

The Maharajah remained silent for a moment. He knew that what that young woman said was true. Without a doubt, that village could not exist if they cut down the forest that surrounded it. On the other hand, he could not back down in front of his troops; he could not show any weakness in front of men so brave and, even, violent.

‘Chop down the trees,’ he finally ordered, without conviction.

Amrita and the people of the village did exactly what they had done only hours before. They rushed into the forest and covered the trunks of the trees with their bodies. The captain of the troops shouted:

‘If necessary, chop down the trees through their bodies!’

Panic seized the hearts of those humble people, but none of them moved away from the tree they had chosen to protect.

All of a sudden, a strange silence descended upon not just the forest, but the whole region. Then, in the distance, a murmur, so soft but threatening that all the people, soldiers and villagers, strained their ears to hear. The leaves stirred in the trees, as if warning the humans to hide. A moment later, with a deafening roar, a wall of sand higher than the palace of the Maharajah fell upon the forest and the village, plunging the brave soldiers with their axes into panic.

It was as if that sandstorm was a living being, a fabulous monster, come to show the people their insignificance before the power of nature. For a few minutes that seemed like forever, elders, women, men, soldiers, girls and boys did whatever they could to protect themselves from the merciless lash of the sand. The villagers gained some protection from the trunks of the trees they were trying to protect. While the soldiers made their horses lie down and used them as parapets. All with their hearts shrivelled by fear, praying to their gods before the fury of that storm that seemed to point its accusing finger of sand at the soldiers.

When the wind died down, the villagers hugging their trees were standing knee-deep in sand. The soldiers and their horses emerged, shaking from the piles of sand which had covered them entirely. Broken branches lay everywhere. The uncomfortable, penetrating, silence returned to the forest. The soldiers avoided looking into the eyes of the villagers. The Maharajah rose shaken from behind the well.

The villagers and soldiers gathered around the well, not knowing what to do, not knowing what to think, unable to understand what had just happened. Amrita placed herself again before the lord of those lands, silently asking him with her eyes: 'Is this what you want for your people?'

The Maharajah broke away from her gaze, lifting his eyes and addressing the entire village.

'I have not been a worthy lord. My decisions have not lived up to your courage and wisdom. By protecting these trees, you have saved our lives.'

Looking over at his soldiers, who seemed to confirm his thoughts, he continued to address the villagers:

‘I humbly beg you to forgive us, to forgive our arrogance and all the damage that we have caused you.’

When the Maharajah returned to his palace, he issued an order which decreed that the inhabitants of that village would never again pay taxes, and that their forest and all living in it would be protected forever.

It is said that Amrita Devi still walks through the forest today to hug trees, and there are even people who claim that they have heard her saying in the deep silence of the forest, ‘Trees, you are so tall and so beautiful! How could we live without you? You protect us, you feed us, you give us the breath of life.’

And then a breeze shakes the leaves, as if recognising her words.

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Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2019).

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## Comments

Behind this story, based mainly on the adaptation of Deborah Lee Rose, is the story of a real woman named Amrita Devi and her village, Khejarli; a story that, unlike the one above, did not have a happy ending.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1731, Ajit Singh, Maharajah of Marwar, in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, sent his troops to the edge of the Tar desert in search of firewood to make lime with which to undertake the construction of a new palace. Among the villages visited by the soldiers was the village of Khejarli, inhabited by members of a sect of Hinduism, the Bishnoi.

This sect, founded by Guru Jambheshwar in 1485, includes among its 29 principles or commandments of its faith those of

protecting trees and wildlife, which led them over many generations to protect the forests where they lived.

When the Maharajah's men arrived at the village of Amrita Devi, who was an old woman, she warned them that felling trees was against their faith, and tried to dissuade them from carrying out their purposes by telling them that their village could not survive without those trees, for the same reasons argued by Amrita in the story. However, in real life, the soldiers cut through Amrita's body to fell the tree that she was hugging, and then went on to cut down hundreds of other trees and kill the 363 other villagers from Khejarli, who had come to protect their forest.

When the Maharajah learned what his soldiers had done, he was horrified and he issued a permanent order so that no trees would ever again be chopped down or animals killed in that region; and for the inhabitants of the area to be exempted from paying taxes.

In 1988, the government of India commemorated the event by naming the Bishnoi village of Khejarli as the first National Environment Memorial.

The name of this village, Khejarli, comes from the *khejri* tree (*Prosopis cineraria*), which is abundant in the area and was already considered sacred among the Bishnoi.

## Sources

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### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 7: Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Preamble: Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world. The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

The Way Forward: However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals. Every individual, family, organization, and community has a vital role to play.

