

Sthala Vṛkṣa Tradition in Indian Temples: A Study of its Spiritual and Ayurvedic Significance within the Indian Knowledge System

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ABSTRACT

The tradition of Sthala Vṛkṣa (sacred temple tree) occupies a significant place in the religious, cultural, and medicinal heritage of Bharat. Rooted in the broader framework of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), sacred temple trees (Vṛkṣa) represent the harmonious integration of spirituality, ecology, healthcare, and community life. Ancient Hindu scriptures, temple traditions, and Ayurvedic texts collectively recognize trees as living embodiments of divine energy and repositories of healing properties. Every major temple in India possesses a Sthala Vṛkṣa associated with specific myths, deities, and ritual practices, thereby transforming the natural environment into an essential component of sacred geography. Beyond their spiritual significance, these trees have traditionally served medicinal purposes, with their leaves, bark, flowers, fruits, and roots being employed in Ayurvedic treatments for various ailments. This study examines the conceptual foundations, scriptural basis, spiritual significance, Ayurvedic importance, and ecological dimensions of Sthala Vṛkṣas within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). Drawing upon Vedic literature, Purāṇic narratives, Āgamic traditions, and classical Ayurvedic texts, the paper argues that the Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition embodies an indigenous model of sustainable living that integrates religious devotion, environmental stewardship, and healthcare knowledge. The paper further highlights selected temple trees from different regions of Bharat to demonstrate the continuing relevance of this tradition in contemporary discussions on cultural heritage preservation and ecological sustainability.

Keywords: Sthala Vṛkṣa, Indian Knowledge System, Ayurveda, Sacred Trees, Temple Traditions, Spiritual Ecology

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian civilization has historically viewed nature as sacred and inseparable from human existence. Trees, rivers, animals, mountains, and forests have been revered not merely as natural resources but as manifestations of divine reality. Among these sacred elements, the Sthala Vṛkṣa occupies a unique position within temple traditions. The term Sthala Vṛkṣa refers to the sacred tree associated with a specific temple and its presiding deity. It forms an integral component of temple identity and often attends as a living witness to sacred myths, religious rituals, and community memory.

The institution of Sthala Vṛkṣa reflects the holistic worldview of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), where spirituality, medicine, ecology, and ethics function as interconnected dimensions of life. Ancient scriptures consistently emphasize the sacredness of trees and their contribution to physical and spiritual well-being. The

Atharva Veda reveres plants and trees as divine gifts that sustain life, while the Bhagavad Gītā identifies the Aśvattha tree as a manifestation of divine excellence (Radhakrishnan 286). Such scriptural foundations provided the basis for the emergence of sacred tree (Vṛkṣa) traditions that later became institutionalized within Hindu temples.

The significance of Sthala Vṛkṣas extends beyond religious symbolism. Many sacred temple trees possess recognized medicinal properties defined in Ayurvedic literature. Their preservation within temple environments facilitated the transmission of traditional healthcare knowledge and promoted biodiversity conservation. Consequently, the nature of Sthala Vṛkṣas offers valuable insights into the interdisciplinary nature of Indian Knowledge Systems.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the conceptual framework of Sthala Vṛkṣa within the Indian Knowledge System(IKS).
2. To analyze the scriptural foundations of sacred temple trees (Sthala Vṛkṣa).
3. To investigate the spiritual significance of Sthala Vṛkṣas in Hindu temple traditions.
4. To explore the Ayurvedic importance of major sacred temple trees.
5. To evaluate the ecological and cultural contributions of Sthala Vṛkṣas.
6. To assess the contemporary relevance of this tradition for sustainable development and heritage preservation.

2. Conceptual Framework of Sthala Vṛkṣa

The concept of Sthala Vṛkṣa (Sacred Temple Tree) occupies a distinctive place in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), where nature, spirituality, medicine, and culture are understood as interconnected dimensions of human life. The Sanskrit term Sthala means "place" or "sacred site," while Vṛkṣa (tree) denotes a "tree." Together, Sthala Vṛkṣa refers to the sacred tree traditionally associated with a specific Hindu temple, revered as an integral component of the temple's religious identity and spiritual ecology. Unlike ordinary trees, the Sthala Vṛkṣa symbolizes the living presence of the presiding deity and embodies the sacred history (Sthala Purāṇa) of the temple. In several instances, these trees are believed to have witnessed divine manifestations, the penance of sages, or significant mythological events, thereby becoming objects of ritual worship alongside the deity.

Within the conceptual framework of the Indian Knowledge System, Sthala Vṛkṣa reflects the holistic worldview that perceives nature as sacred rather than merely utilitarian. Ancient Indian scriptures, including the Vedas, Purāṇas, and Āgamas, highlight the spiritual significance of trees and advocate their conservation as a religious duty. The temple tree thus functions not only as a symbol of divine grace but also as a medium for ecological balance, biodiversity conservation, and community well-being. Rituals such as circumambulation (pradakṣiṇā), offering water, tying sacred threads, and collecting fallen leaves or flowers for worship illustrate the close relationship between devotees and the sacred tree.

From an Ayurvedic viewpoint, many Sthala Vṛkṣas possess well-documented medicinal properties. Trees such as *Azadirachta indica* (Neem), *Aegle marmelos* (Bilva), *Ficus religiosa* (Peepal), and *Ficus benghalensis* (Banyan) are valued for their therapeutic applications in classical Ayurvedic manuscripts, where different parts of the plants are employed in the treatment of various ailments. Consequently, the Sthala Vṛkṣa represents a convergence of spiritual symbolism, traditional healthcare, and environmental ethics. This united understanding demonstrates that temple trees are not merely religious emblems but living repositories of indigenous knowledge, embodying the philosophical principle of harmony between humans, nature, and the divine. Therefore, the abstract framework of Sthala Vṛkṣa offers a valuable lens through which the spiritual, ecological, and medicinal wisdom of Indian civilization can be understood and preserved for future generations.

3. Scriptural Foundations of Sthala Vṛkṣas in Hindu Tradition

The tradition of Sthala Vṛkṣas is deeply rooted in Hindu scriptures, which regard trees as sacred manifestations of divine power and cosmic harmony. The Ṛg Veda and Atharva Veda emphasize respect for nature and advocate ecological balance through the principle of ṛta (cosmic order). The Upaniṣads present the Aśvattha (sacred fig) as the Cosmic Tree symbolizing the relationship between Brahman and creation. The Purāṇas associate exact trees such as Bilva, Tulasī, and Kadamba with Śiva, Viṣṇu, and Krishna respectively, while the Āgamas prescribe the inclusion of sacred trees in temple architecture and ritual worship, establishing Sthala Vṛkṣas as integral to India's spiritual and ecological heritage (Kramrisch, 1946; Kane, 1974; Bhattacharyya, 2007).

3.1 Vedic Foundations

The Vedic literature provides the earliest philosophical basis for the reverence of trees and vegetation in the Indian Knowledge System. The Ṛg Veda portrays trees, rivers, forests, and other natural elements as sacred manifestations of the divine, emphasizing that human well-being depends upon living in harmony with nature. Hymns devoted to the deities associated with forests and plants express gratitude for their life-sustaining qualities and encourage their protection. The Atharva Veda further develops this ecological vision by recognizing the Earth as a nurturing mother whose vegetation sustains all living beings, thereby promoting ethical responsibility to environmental conservation. These teachings are closely linked to the Vedic principle of ṛta, the universal cosmic directive that governs both natural and moral life. Preserving sacred trees and vegetation is therefore understood not merely as an ecological practice but as a religious obligation that maintains harmony between humanity, nature, and the divine. This Vedic worldview later became the philosophical foundation for the Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition in Hindu temples (Radhakrishnan, 1953; Kane, 1974; Kramrisch, 1946).

3.2 Upaniṣadic Symbolism

The Upaniṣads present the symbolic concept of the Cosmic Tree (Aśvattha) as a profound representation of the universe and the eternal relationship between the individual self (Ātman) and the Absolute Reality (Brahman). The Kaṭha Upaniṣad defines the Cosmic Tree as having its roots above and branches below, signifying that the source of creation lies in the transcendental realm while the manifested world extends into material existence. This imagery is further elaborated in the Bhagavad Gītā (15.1–4), where the inverted Aśvattha tree symbolizes the impermanent phenomenal world sustained by the eternal Brahman. The roots denote the unchanging divine reality, whereas the branches denote the diversity of life, knowledge, and worldly experiences. This philosophical symbolism establishes an inseparable relationship between nature and the divine, affirming that sacred trees embody cosmic consciousness. Consequently, the Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition replicates the Upaniṣadic vision by recognizing temple trees as living symbols of spiritual wisdom, ecological harmony, and the omnipresence of Brahman within creation (Radhakrishnan, 1953; Olivelle, 1996; Kramrisch, 1946).

3.3 Purāṇic Narratives

The Purāṇas significantly enriched the tradition of Sthala Vṛkṣas by associating particular trees with Hindu deities and emphasizing their spiritual and ethical reputation. The Bilva (*Aegle marmelos*) is regarded as the most sacred tree dedicated to Lord Śiva, and its trifoliate leaves symbolize Śiva's three eyes and the three fundamental cosmic principles. Likewise, Tulasī (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*) is valued as the beloved consort of Lord Viṣṇu and occupies a central place in Vaiṣṇava worship, representing purity, devotion, and divine grace. The Kadamba (*Neolamarckia cadamba*) is traditionally associated with Lord Krishna, whose childhood pastimes in Vṛndāvana are often shown beneath its fragrant canopy. Beyond these symbolic associations, the Purāṇas extol the planting and protection of trees as acts of exceptional religious merit (puṇya), equating them with charitable and sacrificial deeds. This sacred ecological ethic encouraged communities to sanctuary temple trees, thereby integrating religious devotion with environmental conservation and reinforcing the philosophical foundations of the Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) (Bhattacharyya, 2007; Kramrisch, 1946; Kane, 1974).

3.4 Āgamic Temple Traditions

The Āgamas, which constitute the principal manuals governing Hindu temple construction, iconography, and ritual practices, assign a significant place to the Sthala Vṛkṣa within the sacred temple complex. According to the Āgamic tradition, every temple possesses a unique sacred tree that replicates the spiritual identity of the presiding deity and preserves the temple's Sthala Purāṇa (sacred legend). The Sthala Vṛkṣa is not merely an ornamental feature but an essential component of temple architecture, symbolizing the continuity of divine presence and the congruence between nature and worship. Rituals such as circumambulation (pradakṣiṇā), offering water, tying sacred threads, and presenting flowers and leaves to the deity reinforce the tree's religious significance. Devotees often seek blessings beneath the sacred tree, believing it to possess spiritual and healing powers. Thus, the Āgamic tradition integrates architecture, ritual, ecology, and devotion, establishing the Sthala Vṛkṣa as a living embodiment of sacred space and an enduring expression of the holistic principles of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) (Kramrisch, 1946; Acharya, 1946; Bhattacharyya, 2007).

4. Spiritual Significance of Sthala Vṛkṣas

Sthala Vṛkṣas occupy a central place in Hindu spirituality as living manifestations of divine presence and sacred energy. Each temple tree is closely allied with the presiding deity and the Sthala Purāṇa, preserving the temple's mythological and spiritual identity. These sacred trees symbolize spiritual growth, endurance, and the inseparable connection between humanity, nature, and the Divine. Devotees perform rituals such as circumambulation (pradakṣiṇā), offering water, tying sacred threads, and meditating beneath the tree to seek blessings, health, and inner purification. Through these devotional practices, Sthala Vṛkṣas become enduring symbols of faith, ecological harmony, and the holistic worldview of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) (Kramrisch, 1946; Kane, 1974; Bhattacharyya, 2007).

4.1 Trees as Manifestations of Divine Presence

In the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), sacred trees are regarded as visible manifestations of divine presence, embodying the spiritual energy of the presiding deity. The Sthala Vṛkṣa is not merely a botanical element but a sacred symbol that connects devotees with the divine through ritual, worship, and meditation. Hindu scriptures describe trees as abodes of gods, sages, and celestial beings, thereby elevating them to objects of reverence. The presence of a sacred tree within a temple signifies purity, protection, and cosmic harmony, encouraging devotees to cultivate spiritual awareness while fostering reverence for nature as an expression of the Divine (Kramrisch, 1946; Kane, 1974; Bhattacharyya, 2007).

4.2 Sacred Trees and Temple Mythology

Sacred trees occupy a significant place in temple mythology, where each Sthala Vṛkṣa is closely associated with the beginning and sacred history (Sthala Purāṇa) of a temple. Mythological narratives describe these trees as witnesses to divine manifestations, the penance of sages, and miraculous events that sanctified the temple site. Consequently, the sacred tree develops an enduring symbol of the deity's presence and the temple's spiritual identity. Stories relating to the Bilva, Tulasī, Kadamba, and Aśvattha trees reinforce their religious importance and instigate devotees to preserve them as living embodiments of faith, cultural memory, and ecological harmony within the Indian Knowledge System (Kramrisch, 1946; Kane, 1974; Bhattacharyya, 2007).

4.3 Symbolism of Spiritual Growth

Within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), the Sthala Vṛkṣa symbolizes the gradual evolution of the human soul toward spiritual realization. Just as a tree develops from a small seed into a mature organism through deep roots, a strong trunk, and expansive branches, spiritual life progresses through discipline, wisdom, devotion, and righteous conduct. The origins signify unwavering faith and moral foundations; the trunk represents inner strength and self-discipline. At the same time, the branches and leaves symbolize the expansion of knowledge, compassion, and service to humanity. This symbolism reflects the Upaniṣadic vision of the Cosmic Tree, in which all existence is sustained by the Supreme Reality (Brahman). Worshipping the Sthala Vṛkṣa reminds

devotees that spiritual growth requires perseverance, patience, and harmony with nature. Thus, the sacred tree becomes a living metaphor for self-transformation, divine consciousness, and the integration of ecological responsibility with spiritual practice, reinforcing the holistic ideals of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) (Radhakrishnan, 1953; Kramrisch, 1946; Bhattacharyya, 2007).

4.4 Rituals and Devotional Practices

Rituals associated with Sthala Vṛkṣas constitute an integral part of Hindu temple worship, reflecting the harmonious relationship between devotion, nature, and spiritual well-being. Devotees express reverence to the sacred tree through pradakṣiṇā (circumambulation), offering water, milk, flowers, and sacred threads, while reciting prayers and hymns dedicated to the presiding deity. Many temples celebrate annual festivals in which the Sthala Vṛkṣa is ceremonially worshipped, emphasizing its role as a living symbol of divine grace and temple identity. In several traditions, devotees meditate beneath the sacred tree, believing that its sanctified environment promotes mental peace, spiritual purification, and inner transformation. These devotional practices reinforce the understanding that nature itself is an expression of the divine and should be protected with reverence. Consequently, the worship of Sthala Vṛkṣas strengthens religious faith, preserves temple traditions, and promotes ecological consciousness, embodying the holistic principles of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) (Kramrisch, 1946; Kane, 1974; Bhattacharyya, 2007).

4.5 Sacred Trees and Pilgrimage Traditions

Sacred trees have long been an integral component of Hindu pilgrimage traditions, serving as living symbols of the spiritual heritage and historical identity of temple places. In many renowned temples, the Sthala Vṛkṣa is regarded as an inseparable element of the pilgrimage experience because it embodies the sacred history (Sthala Purāṇa) related with the deity. Pilgrims traditionally visit the sacred tree after offering worship in the sanctum, believing that reverence to the Sthala Vṛkṣa completes the pilgrimage and enhances its spiritual merit. Rituals such as circumambulation (pradakṣiṇā), offering water, tying sacred threads, and meditating beneath the tree express gratitude, devotion, and the objective of divine blessings. Many sacred trees are also connected with miraculous events, the penance of sages, or the manifestation of deities, thereby strengthening devotees' belief and preserving local religious traditions. Beyond their spiritual role, these trees provide shade, ecological stability, and a serene environment for reflection, thereby supporting both physical comfort and mental well-being during pilgrimage. Consequently, Sthala Vṛkṣas represent the harmonious integration of devotion, environmental stewardship, and cultural continuity, illustrating the holistic philosophy of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) in which sacred landscapes nurture both spiritual realization and ecological responsibility (Kramrisch, 1946; Kane, 1974; Bhattacharyya, 2007).

5. Ayurvedic Significance of Sthala Vṛkṣas

The Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition embodies the close relationship between spirituality and healthcare within the Indian Knowledge System, where sacred trees are valued not only for their religious significance but also for their medicinal properties. Ayurveda knows numerous temple trees as important sources of therapeutic substances used in preventive and curative medicine. Species such as Bilva (*Aegle marmelos*), Neem (*Azadirachta indica*), Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), Banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*), and Tulasī (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*) are described in classical Ayurvedic literature for their pharmacological qualities and their ability to promote physical and mental well-being. Different parts of these trees, including leaves, bark, roots, flowers, fruits, and latex, are employed in formulations for digestive disorders, respiratory illnesses, skin diseases, fever, inflammation, and wound healing. The presence of these medicinal trees within temple premises also contributes to a healthy environment by improving air quality, providing shade, and supporting biodiversity. Their conservation through religious traditions has enabled the preservation of valuable ethnomedicinal knowledge across generations. Thus, Sthala Vṛkṣas represent a unique synthesis of Ayurveda, environmental ethics, and spiritual practice, demonstrating how sacred ecology contributes to holistic health and sustainable living within the broader framework of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) (Dash & Kashyap, 2001; Sharma, 2001; Lad & Frawley, 1986).

5.1 Sacred Trees in Ayurvedic Literature

Sacred trees occupy a prominent place in Ayurvedic literature, where they are valued not only for their therapeutic properties but also for their role in preserving the balance between human health and the natural environment. Classical Ayurvedic treatises such as the *Caraka Saṃhitā*, *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, and *Aṣṭāṅga Hṛdaya* define numerous medicinal plants that are also revered as *Sthala Vṛkṣas* in Hindu temples. Trees including *Bilva* (*Aegle marmelos*), *Neem* (*Azadirachta indica*), *Aśvattha* (*Ficus religiosa*), *Vaṭa* (*Ficus benghalensis*), and *Tulasī* (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*) are recommended for maintaining health, enhancing immunity, and treating disorders affecting the digestive, respiratory, dermatological, and circulatory systems. Ayurveda classifies these trees (*Vṛkṣa*) according to their *rasa* (taste), *guṇa* (qualities), *vīrya* (potency), *vipāka* (post-digestive effect), and *prabhāva* (specific therapeutic action), enabling physicians to prescribe them systematically for preventive and curative care. The preservation of these species within temple precincts has contributed to the conservation of medicinal biodiversity and the transmission of indigenous botanical knowledge across generations. The incorporation of sacred ecology and traditional medicine demonstrates that the *Sthala Vṛkṣa* tradition is not merely a religious practice but also an effective cultural mechanism for safeguarding valuable medicinal resources. Consequently, Ayurvedic literature presents sacred trees as indispensable components of holistic healthcare, environmental sustainability, and spiritual well-being, illustrating the integrated vision of health and nature that characterizes the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) (Dash & Kashyap, 2001; Sharma, 2001; Lad & Frawley, 1986).

Ayurvedic literature identifies several sacred trees as invaluable medicinal resources that contribute to both physical health and spiritual well-being. Among them, *Bilva* (*Aegle marmelos*) is extensively described for its digestive, anti-inflammatory, and antimicrobial properties. Its fruits, leaves, roots, and bark are employed in the treatment of diarrhoea, dysentery, diabetes, and gastrointestinal disorders. *Neem* (*Azadirachta indica*) is celebrated for its broad-spectrum antimicrobial, antifungal, and blood-purifying actions, making it a significant remedy for skin diseases, fever, and wound healing. *Tulasī* (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*), revered as the "Queen of Herbs," is widely prescribed for respiratory ailments, stress management, immune enhancement, and metabolic disorders owing to its adaptogenic and antioxidant properties. *Kadamba* (*Neolamarckia cadamba*) is traditionally used in Ayurvedic formulations for fever, inflammation, oral diseases, and digestive complaints, while *Aśvattha* (*Ficus religiosa*) is treasured for treating ulcers, diabetes, asthma, and inflammatory conditions through preparations derived from its bark, leaves, fruits, and latex.

Beyond their therapeutic applications, these sacred trees symbolize longevity, purity, resilience, and spiritual vitality within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). Their preservation in temple precincts ensured the conservation of medicinal biodiversity while enabling communities to access valuable herbal remedies. The integration of sacred ecology with Ayurvedic pharmacology demonstrates that the *Sthala Vṛkṣa* tradition functions as a holistic classification in which environmental conservation, religious devotion, and traditional healthcare mutually reinforce one another. Consequently, these temple trees continue to represent living repositories of indigenous medicinal knowledge and sustainable healthcare practices fixed in India's cultural heritage (Sharma, 2001; Dash & Kashyap, 2001; Lad & Frawley, 1986).

6. Case Studies of Major Temple Trees in Bharat

The *Sthala Vṛkṣa* tradition is best understood through the sacred trees conserved in prominent temples across India, where each tree embodies unique theological, historical, ecological, and medicinal significance. The ancient Mango Tree (*Mangifera indica*) at the Ekambareswarar Temple, Kanchipuram, is connected with Goddess Pārvatī's penance and symbolizes fertility, marital harmony, and the unity of the four Vedas through its traditionally described four distinct branches. At the Śrī Rāṅganāthaswamy Temple, Srirangam, the Magizha Tree (*Mimusops elengi*) is valued as a symbol of purity, devotion, and spiritual fragrance, and its flowers are widely used in temple worship.

The Kadamba Tree (*Neolamarckia cadamba*) at the Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple is linked with the sacred origin of Madurai and the manifestation of Lord Śiva as Sundarēśvara, representing divine refinement and the city's cultural identity. Likewise, the Jambu Tree (*Syzygium cumini*) at the Jambukeswarar Temple,

Tiruvanaikaval, is inseparably associated with the temple's Sthala Purāṇa, where Lord Śiva is believed to have manifested beneath the tree, making it a symbol of wisdom, water, and spiritual purification.

In North Indian temple traditions, the Aśvattha Tree (*Ficus religiosa*) occupies a central position as a symbol of immortality, cosmic consciousness, and the presence of Brahman. It is frequently worshipped during circumambulation and devotional offerings. Similarly, Neem Trees (*Azadirachta indica*) in Śākta temples are viewed as manifestations of the Divine Mother and are related with healing, protection, and the removal of negative influences. Their medicinal properties further reinforce their sacred status within temple complexes. Collectively, these case studies demonstrate that Sthala Vṛkṣas function not merely as sacred botanical specimens but as living repositories of mythology, Ayurveda, environmental conservation, and regional cultural heritage. Their continued preservation illustrates the holistic philosophy of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), in which spirituality, ecology, and traditional medicine remain deeply interconnected (Kramrisch, 1946; Soundara Rajan, 1972; Michell, 1988).

7. Ecological and Cultural Dimensions

The Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition exemplifies the ecological wisdom embedded within the Indian Knowledge System by integrating biodiversity conservation, environmental ethics, and cultural heritage with religious practice. Temple trees serve as central points for preserving indigenous plant species and maintaining ecological balance within sacred landscapes. Their protection through religious customs has enabled many rare and medicinal species to survive despite rapid urbanization and environmental degradation. Temple premises often play the role of micro-ecosystems that provide habitat for birds, insects, and other organisms, thereby enhancing local biodiversity and ecological resilience.

The concept of sacred groves (Devrai, Kāvu, and Sarna) further extends this conservation ethic by protecting clusters of native vegetation devoted to deities or ancestral spirits. These sacred landscapes regulate local climate, conserve soil moisture, recharge groundwater, and support diverse biological communities. Such practices demonstrate an indigenous environmental ethic that regards nature not as a source for exploitation but as a sacred manifestation of the Divine deserving reverence and protection.

The preservation of Sthala Vṛkṣas also contributes significantly to safeguarding India's cultural heritage. Each sacred tree (Vṛkṣa) is associated with temple mythology, local traditions, festivals, and ritual practices, transmitting historical knowledge and spiritual values across generations. Consequently, temple trees function as living cultural monuments that strengthen community identity and continuity.

In the contemporary context, the Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition offers valuable insights for sustainable development by promoting biodiversity conservation, traditional healthcare, climate resilience, and community participation in environmental stewardship. Its holistic philosophy aligns closely with the principles of sustainable reserve management and ecological justice, demonstrating that cultural and religious traditions can effectively support modern conservation initiatives. Thus, the ecological and cultural dimensions of Sthala Vṛkṣas illustrate the enduring relevance of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) in addressing present-day environmental challenges while preserving the spiritual and biological heritage of Bharat (Gadgil & Vartak, 1976; Kramrisch, 1946; Shiva, 2005).

8. Sthala Vṛkṣas and the Indian Knowledge System

The Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition represents one of the most enduring expressions of the Indian Knowledge System, reflecting a holistic understanding of the interdependence between humanity, nature, spirituality, and health. Unlike modern approaches that often separate environmental management from religious and cultural life, IKS regards nature as a sacred manifestation of the universal order. Sacred temple trees are therefore not merely botanical units but living symbols of divine presence, ecological balance, and cultural continuity. This holistic perspective encourages the conservation of biodiversity while cultivating ethical responsibility toward all forms of life.

A distinctive feature of the Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition is the incorporation of spirituality with healthcare. Many temple trees, including Bilva, Neem, Tulasī, Aśvattha, and Banyan, possess well-documented medicinal properties in Ayurveda. Their preservation within temple precincts ensured the continued availability of valuable medicinal resources and reinforced the concept that physical well-being, mental harmony, and spiritual development are interconnected dimensions of human life.

The environmental sustainability embedded in this tradition demonstrates the practical wisdom of indigenous ecological knowledge. Religious customs surrounding sacred trees have contributed to the protection of native plant species, the maintenance of temple ecosystems, and the transmission of protection ethics across generations. Such practices illustrate how cultural beliefs can effectively support long-term environmental stewardship without dependence on formal regulatory systems.

In the contemporary context, the Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition offers valuable insights for addressing biodiversity loss, climate change, and sustainable source management. Integrating indigenous ecological knowledge with modern conservation policies can strengthen community participation and encourage culturally sensitive environmental governance. Consequently, the Indian Knowledge System provides an important intellectual framework for rethinking sustainability through the harmonious integration of spiritual values, ecological ethics, traditional medicine, and cultural heritage. The continued preservation of Sthala Vṛkṣas demonstrates that ancient traditions remain highly relevant to contemporary environmental and public health challenges (Kramrisch, 1946; Gadgil & Vartak, 1976; Shiva, 2005; Dash & Kashyap, 2001).

9. CONCLUSION

The Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition represents a remarkable synthesis of spirituality, ecology, Ayurveda, and cultural heritage within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). This paper has demonstrated that sacred temple trees are not merely religious symbols but living repositories of philosophical wisdom, ecological ethics, and traditional medicinal knowledge. Their significance is profoundly rooted in the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Purāṇas, and Āgamic traditions, which collectively present nature as an expression of the divine and emphasize humanity's moral responsibility to protect it. Through their association with temple mythology, worship, ritual and pilgrimage traditions, Sthala Vṛkṣas continue to strengthen the spiritual identity of sacred spaces while preserving regional cultural memory.

The Ayurvedic importance of these trees (Vṛkṣa) further illustrates the integrated worldview of IKS, wherein health, environment, and spirituality are inseparable. Temple trees such as Bilva, Neem, Tulasī, Aśvattha, Kadamba, and Jambu have long been valued for their medicinal properties and have contributed to the preservation of indigenous plant diversity through religious practice. Their continued protection within temple ecosystems has enabled the transmission of ethnobotanical knowledge across generations while supporting biodiversity and ecological resilience.

In the context of contemporary environmental challenges, including biodiversity loss, climate change, and the erosion of traditional knowledge, the Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition offers a significant model for sustainable development. It demonstrates how religious values and indigenous ecological practices can complement modern conservation plans by encouraging community participation and environmental stewardship. Revitalizing this tradition through interdisciplinary research, heritage conservation, environmental education, and public policy can strengthen efforts to safeguard both India's natural resources and its cultural legacy. Thus, the Sthala Vṛkṣa tradition remains a timeless expression of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), offering enduring insights into the harmonious coexistence of humanity, nature, and the sacred while contributing meaningfully to sustainable and holistic development (Kramrisch, 1946; Gadgil & Vartak, 1976; Dash & Kashyap, 2001; Shiva, 2005).

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