



Research Article

Depiction of Plants and Trees in Ancient and Contemporary India

 Peddinti Srikavya

Independent Researcher, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author: * Peddinti Srikavya 

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20380915>

Abstract

The depiction of botanical and arboreal elements in Indian visual culture plays a vital role as a window into the subcontinent's progressing cultural and spiritual history. Spanning from the proto-historic urbanism of the Indus Valley Civilisation to the monumental statehood of the Mauryan Empire, vegetal motifs functioned not purely as aesthetic embellishments but as potent emblems of divinity, fecundity, material wealth, and the symbiotic link between mankind and the environment. Iconographic evidence derived from glyptic seals, early relief sculptures, and sacred topoi indicates that trees were conceptualised as living, sentient entities imbued with ritual significance, protective qualities, and auspicious power, rather than as mere exercises in botanical realism.

This paper traces the structural and conceptual evolution of plant symbolism from the Harappan matrix through to the Mauryan epoch, subsequently juxtaposing these ancient iconographies with modern and contemporary artistic portrayals in India. It contends that while early Indian art primarily codified the tree as a sanctified, socially integrated archetype, contemporary creative practices frequently reframe organic flora through the lenses of ecological crisis, rapid urbanisation, personal memory, and political identity. In spite of these shifting paradigms, the persistent centrality of arboreal themes points to the tree's position as one of the most resilient, expressive, and continuously reimagined motifs within the lexicon of Indian art history.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 01-04-2026
- Accepted: 21-05-2026
- Published: 25-05-2026
- IJCRM:5(3); 2026: 363-366
- ©2026, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Srikavya P. Depiction of Plants and Trees in Ancient and Contemporary India. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2026;5(3):363-366.

Access this Article Online



www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: Indian Art, Plant Motifs, Tree Imagery, Indus Valley Civilisation, Mauryan Period, Sacred Nature, Yakshi, Peepal Tree, Ecological Art, Contemporary Indian Art.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nature has always held a deep place in the Indian imagination, and this is clearly visible in the history of Indian art. Among natural forms, trees occupy a particularly important position because they often appear as markers of sacredness, fertility, protection, and continuity. In many early works, the tree is not rendered as background scenery; instead, it is shown as an entity with symbolic force and ritual significance.

The period stretching from the Indus Valley Civilisation to the Mauryan age allows one to trace significant changes in the treatment of vegetal imagery. In the Indus context, tree motifs occur mainly on seals and in compact symbolic form, while in the Mauryan and related early historic context the same interest in sacred nature becomes more monumental and formalised. This shift reveals a wider development in Indian art, from encoded signs toward public sculptural articulation.

A comparison with the current art scene is equally productive. Contemporary Indian artists continue to draw on plant and tree imagery, yet they often do so in response to concerns very different from those of ancient artists. Questions of ecology, loss, migration, material experimentation, and environmental ethics shape the modern treatment of vegetal forms, even as older associations with sacredness and renewal continue to survive in transformed ways.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Available literature on Indus visual culture frequently points to the recurring appearance of the peepal tree in seal imagery. Introductory educational and archaeological summaries note that the peepal seems to have occupied a special place in Harappan society, and its repeated use on seals has often been read as evidence of ritual respect or tree worship. Because the Indus script has not been deciphered, such readings remain interpretive, but the recurrence of this motif strongly suggests cultural importance.

The study of early Indian sculpture has added a second major structure for understanding vegetal imagery: the cult of yakshas and yakshis. Art-historical discussions explain that these beings were associated with rivers, mountains, and especially trees, making them central to the wider theme of nature veneration in ancient India. This body of scholarship is useful because it shows that early Indian art did not isolate plant life from human or divine presence; instead, it conceived a world in which natural forces were animated and relational.

Literature on Mauryan art highlights another important development: the increasing use of stone and the appearance of increasingly formal symbolic motifs. Accounts of Mauryan visual culture refer to the tree-in-railing as an important early symbol, while museum catalogues preserve examples such as the Kalpavriksha image, where a sacred tree is visually enclosed and emphasized. Such material indicates that trees had become not only revered forms but also subjects of deliberate artistic codification.

At the same time, the literature presents certain challenges. The chronology of several important tree-related works is debated or overlaps with the immediately post-Mauryan period, particularly in relation to some yakshi sculptures. For this reason, the present article distinguishes between securely

Mauryan evidence and broader early historic developments that emerged from the same cultural environment.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative and interpretive method grounded in art history. It relies on secondary sources, museum descriptions, and established reference material to examine how trees and plant forms were represented, what visual contexts they appeared in, and what meanings scholars have attached to them. The focus is not on statistical analysis but on symbolic reading, formal comparison, and historical interpretation.

The study proceeds in two stages. First, it analyses the visual and cultural role of trees in the Indus Valley Civilisation and the Mauryan period. Second, it compares such historical usages with broad tendencies in contemporary Indian art, especially where artists engage with ecology, memory, and the politics of environment. Since the Harappan corpus does not provide readable textual explanations, the discussion remains careful and avoids absolute claims where the evidence is suggestive rather than conclusive.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Tree imagery in the Indus Valley Civilisation

The Indus Valley Civilisation offers some of the earliest evidence for the artistic significance of trees in South Asia. The peepal tree is especially important, appearing on seals in ways that imply ceremonial or sacred value rather than botanical interest alone. The tree is often given visual prominence, which suggests that it may have functioned as a symbol around which communal belief was organized.

This point is important as it reveals an early tendency in Indian art: nature is presented as meaningful presence. In Harappan material, the tree is not a background setting for human action but a central motif with possible ritual force. Even if complete interpretation is impossible, the visual language implies reverence and selective cultural attention.

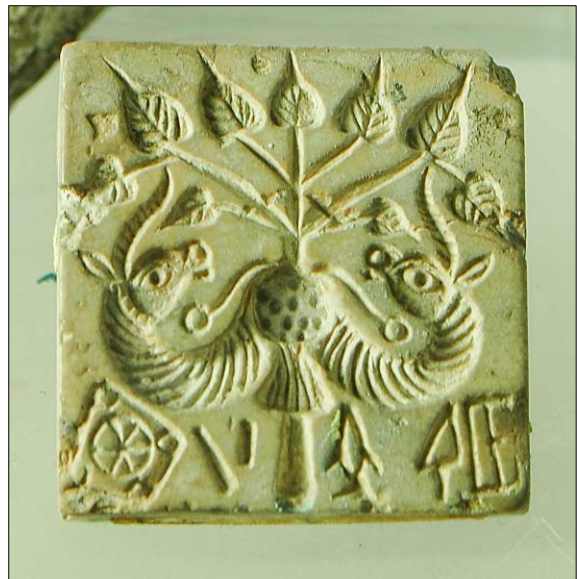


Fig 1: Indus Valley seal with peepal tree motif, illustrating the early sacred and symbolic role of tree imagery in Harappan visual culture.

2. The transition to monumental form

In the Mauryan age, the artistic treatment of natural motifs underwent a major transformation. The move toward large-scale stone production made it possible for earlier sacred signs to be translated into more public and durable forms. As a result, the representation of trees became more structured and architecturally framed, as seen in the tree-in-railing motif and in sculptural examples associated with sacred enclosures.

This development is significant because it shows that the tree had become not only a sacred object but also an iconic emblem suitable for monumental art. The *Kalpavriksha* image, for example, presents the tree as a honored entity marked off within a protective boundary. In artistic terms, this is a movement from compact symbol to ceremonial image.



Fig 2: Kalpavriksha sculpture, showing the sacred tree transformed into monumental sculptural form and framed as an object of reverence.

3. Nature in Mauryan ideological culture

The Mauryan period also calls for reflection on the wider place of nature in political and ethical thought. Scholarship on Ashoka's worldview suggests a meaningful concern with living beings, flora, and fauna, linking moral vision with a wider attentiveness to the natural order. Although individual artworks cannot always be connected directly to royal policy, this wider climate helps explain why vegetal imagery carried more than ornamental value.

Thus, plants and trees in Mauryan visual culture should be read within a larger framework of sacred kingship, ethical order, and public symbolism. Nature wasn't merely observed; it was incorporated into a civilisational language of legitimacy, piety, and astral order.

4. Tree, fertility, and the female figure

One of the most powerful developments in early Indian art is the association between the tree and the female body in yakshi

imagery. Art-historical sources describe yakshis as nature-linked beings whose presence in sculpture reflects fertility, abundance, and auspiciousness, while famous bracket figures show women clasping or leaning against trees in a gesture that activates the motif symbolically. These works belong partly to the post-Mauryan horizon, but their conceptual foundations lie in early traditions that regarded trees as animate and beneficent. This connection demonstrates that vegetal imagery in Indian art remains deeply relational. The tree is not represented as isolated nature; it becomes meaningful through touch, embodiment, ritual, and the hope of renewal. In the present framework, artistic depiction turns the tree into an image of life-generating force.



Fig 3: Shalabhanjika on Eastern Torana (gateway) under a tree, at the Buddhist Sanchi Stupa site, Image credits:

5. Continuity and change across periods

When the Indus and Mauryan materials are placed side by side, several changes become visible. The first is a shift in format, from small seals to sculptural and architectural motifs. The second is a shift in clarity, from enigmatic symbolism to more explicit ritual framing. The third is a shift in material expression, with stone making sacred vegetal signs more permanent and publicly legible.

Yet a larger continuity remains. In both periods, the tree appears as a culturally charged form that mediates between nature, belief, and human community. This continuity is one reason why tree imagery continued to be important in later Indian art across Buddhist, Jain, Hindu, and provincial traditions.

6. Juxtaposition with today's art scenario

The place of plants and trees in contemporary Indian art differs markedly from their role in ancient visual culture, though

important connections remain. Many artists today use vegetal imagery to speak about environmental destruction, changing landscapes, extraction, memory, and the crisis of sustainable living. Trees are often shown not simply as sacred presences but as witnesses to violence, urban erasure, and ecological instability.

This denotes a significant departure from the dominant ancient

emphasis on sanctity, fertility, and auspicious power. In the contemporary scene, the plant may become archive, protest, evidence, or metaphor. At the same time, artists continue to draw on inherited forms such as the peepal, banyan, lotus, and branching pattern, showing that older symbolic languages still matter within newer conceptual frameworks.

The contrast may be outlined as follows:

Aspect	Indus Valley Civilisation	Mauryan Period	Contemporary Indian Art
Role of tree imagery	Sacred or possibly cultic sign, often condensed on seals.	Sacred and public symbol, often formalised in stone and ritual motifs.	Vehicle for ecological reflection, identity, memory, activism, and renewed symbolism.
Visual mode	Compact, coded, emblematic.	Monumental, sculptural, architectonic.	Cross-medium, including painting, installation, textiles, photography, and public art.
Human relation	Suggested but not fully clear.	More visibly connected through yakshi and fertility symbolism.	Often autobiographical, political, archival, or environmental.
Meaning of nature	Sacred presence.	Sacred and ideologically meaningful order.	Sacred, vulnerable, contested, and reimagined.

What links ancient and contemporary art is the refusal to reduce the tree to mere scenery. In both cases, vegetal form is still a bearer of thought. What has changed is the kind of thought it carries: from cultic and cosmic significance in early art to ecological and critical urgency in much contemporary practice.

5. CONCLUSION


The study of plants and trees in Indian art from the Indus Valley Civilisation to the Mauryan age makes clear that nature was central to early visual expression. Harappan seals suggest the ritual importance of the peepal tree, while Mauryan and related early historic imagery developed a richer sculptural language of sacred enclosure, fertility, and symbolic public display. Across these centuries, the tree remained more than a decorative motif; it operated as a sign of life, reverence, and cultural order.

Placed beside the present-day art scene, these early traditions reveal both persistence and reinterpretation. Contemporary Indian artists continue to use vegetal imagery because plants and trees still offer powerful ways to think through memory, identity, spirituality, and ecological crisis. The permanent presence of the tree in Indian art therefore reflects not continuity of style alone, but continuity of cultural attention to the living world.

NO CONFLICT OF INTEREST:

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About the Corresponding Author	
	Peddinti Sri Kavya is an Art History enthusiast with experience in curation and teaching Art History and Aesthetics. Her approach involves linking historical and philosophical ideas to modern and contemporary artistic expressions.