

The Pantheistic Hermit and the Sacred Forest

Perspectives of Vedic Ecology

Aloysius Sebastian

Assistant Professor

Department of English (UG)

Kristu Jayanti College, Bangalore

Email: aloysius.s@kristujayanti.com

Abstract

Chandamama, a monthly magazine published in 13 Indian languages, was tremendously popular in the country in the latter half of the 20th century. It played a very influential role in the life of Indian children of the time. Chandamama predominantly attempted to portray through its stories an Indian society in such a manner that it would inculcate “Indian traditions, values and culture” among children. This article observes how several stories in Chandamama reflected the problem of deforestation and the depletion of wildlife caused by increasing industrialisation and urbanisation in 20th century India. Moreover, the stories in Chandamama also constitute a call for the protection and conservation of wildlife, which is achieved through the representation of a Vedic society with the recurring image of the “holy,” pantheistic hermit residing in the pastoral forest, and also the representation of the creatures of the forest as sacred and as possessing special powers that they use for the welfare of humans who live in harmony with nature.

Keywords: *Indian comics, Chandamama, hermit, Vedic ecology, pantheism, deforestation.*

Chandamama was a monthly magazine that was published in India from 1947 July, that is, just one month before India gained independence from British imperialism, until 2013, with a few short and long intervals in between. It was published in thirteen Indian languages, including English. *Chandamama* had a very wide readership in different Indian states, and it played a significant role in the lives of the children of the time, greatly influencing the way they grew into adults and citizens.

This article analyses a recurrent image in *Chandamama*, that of a hermit meditating under a tree in a forest abounding with wildlife. Moreover, forests and wildlife are represented as sacred. Based on the analysis of several such representations in the stories in *Chandamama*, this article argues that such representations are due to a nostalgia for a Vedic past when there existed a certain harmony between humans, nature and wildlife, and as a reaction against growing industrialisation and urbanisation in the country in the latter half of the 20th century, accompanied by massive deforestation, extinction and endangerment of wildlife.

Industrialisation, Urbanisation, and Deforestation in India

Industrialisation and urbanisation rapidly increased in India after Independence, particularly because of the implementation of the mixed economy system, and the consequent growth of the private sector. Industrialisation in India had already been begun by the British. By the time India became independent, already there were several active industries in the country; such as steel, cement, textiles, sugar, light consumer goods, and engineering industries. After Independence, there was much focus on industrialisation to reach fast economic growth and to meet the demands of the rapidly increasing population. “An industry-driven development strategy was considered appropriate for rapid economic development, and accordingly, from the early 1950s, strategies for industrialisation received considerable attention” (Das 169). “The rapid growth in forest industries, in consonance with the greatly expanded nature of industrialisation since Independence, has necessitated an increased cut from the forests” (Guha 138).

The Hermit in the Sacred Forest

Several stories in *Chandamama* reflect this reaction against the depletion of nature. However, this is usually seen not through a direct call for the conservation of nature, forests and wildlife, but in an indirect way. Reaction against growing urbanisation and industrialisation, accompanied by the gradual destruction of forests and wildlife is seen in *Chandamama* through the glorification of a Vedic period of sages and hermits, and a pantheistic society that lived harmoniously with nature. A recurring image in many of these stories is of a hermit meditating under a tree in a forest, with elaborate descriptions of the beauty of the forest surrounding him.

In the story, *Agasthya: The Champion of Integration*, the Sun and the Vindhya Mountain, two elements of nature, are personified and presented as powerful and very influential upon human life, and even the gods cannot control them. A quarrel breaks out between the Sun and the Vindhya Mountain. The Vindhya raises its head very high so that the Sun’s rays would not reach the earth. Since even the gods are worried about the situation, they approach sage Agasthya because they think he is in a better position than them to control the mountain. The sage succeeds in controlling the mountain, and the Sun can spread its light to the inhabitants of the earth. Thus, Agasthya, being a *rishi* closely associated with nature, and being the “*guru*” of the mountain, succeeds in controlling it.

In the Vedic Age, several hermits lived in forests, rapt in meditation after renouncing all worldly wealth. They usually lived on what they got from trees in the forest and the offerings of devotees.

Possibly with the dawn of the age of the *Upasanas*, the practice of retreating to the forests came into vogue. Perhaps the sanctity which primitive thought attaches to forests, trees and high places had something to do with the growth of this practice, which, over time, grew into a veritable institution (Pande 326).

Call for the protection of natural resources and wildlife is seen in the story, *The Divine Pool*, of the *Chandamama* issue of 1974 June. Moreover, the story also indicates urbanisation and human constructions as posing a threat to the sustenance of natural resources and wildlife.

In *The Divine Pool*, as a king is standing by a pool, a hermit comes to him and says,

“Oh King! This water is divine. Once, for miles around, everything was arid. Then it rained. A sparrow that flew overhead, unable to bear the heat of the sun, came down, and pierced the earth with its beak. Then an eagle scooped up the earth. At once, this spring came up. Then all the animals of the desert and the nearby forest came here to drink water. This spring is the lifeline for all God’s creatures here” (41).

However, later in the story, after the king constructs a wall around the pool to prevent any creatures drinking from it, the hermit says,

“The water of the pool is no longer divine. The dumb creatures of God made that pool with their efforts. They did not expect any reward for their work. However, you built a wall around the pool and wanted to add to your fame. The animals in the forest could no longer quench their thirst. Hence the pool lost its sanctity. Its water turned sour at your selfishness” (42).

The king feels ashamed at the words of the hermit. So, he demolishes the wall, and the pool again becomes “a natural spring fit for God’s creatures” (42). The wall built by the king symbolises urbanisation and human interference upon nature.

From *The Day the Earth Turned Gold*:

The silence of the mountain, the sunrise and sunset which coloured the landscape, the breeze which embraced him with the message of freedom, the songs of the birds in the wood, and above all, the quiet, yet overwhelming presence of the mendicant, slowly made the king a different man. The little time he spent there every day had its sure effect on the rest of his time and routine (37).

The king says to the mendicant, “When I sit here and marvel at the splendour of nature all around, at sunsets and sunrises when the colours of heaven are sprinkled on earth – at the diamond fringed clouds – at all God’s creation – all appear to me a thousand times more wonderful than gold” (38).

The Vedic practice of mendicancy in the forest was not only a search for spiritual enlightenment, but was also an escape from the problems of social life. It was an age of much economic change and frequent wars. It was also a time when there were frequent clashes among different spiritual groups.

The Vedic age was an age of great spiritual vitality, when the clash of rival schools and sects and basic points of view fed the flame of spiritual quest. At the same time, it was an age of frequent and bloody wars and much economic change. These circumstances must have created a feeling of distress and despair in the minds of many. Thus, when the circumstances were ripe, the old seed of a continuing ascetic tradition from remote prehistoric times found a suitable soil and burst into flower (Pande 328).

Similar to how mendicancy in the forest was induced by an inclination towards escaping from the social turmoil of the time, nostalgia for spiritual life in the forest as represented in *Chandamama* through the recurring image of the sage in the forest signifies a wish to escape from the social turmoil of the second half of the 20th century. After gaining independence from British imperialism, India was in a state of socio-political change and turmoil. Initially, there was the partition and the chaos that followed, resulting in the genocide of millions of people, and the displacement of about 14 million Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. Moreover, the country was faced with other major problems like stark poverty, near-total illiteracy, and wide prevalence of diseases, massive unemployment, and rapid population growth. Industrialisation and urbanisation were on the rise, and these destroyed forests, caused extinction and endangerment of wildlife, environmental degradation and growing pollution in cities.

In *Chandamama*, escapism from the social turmoil of post-Independence India can be seen through a nostalgia for the Vedic age represented through the recurring image of the hermit meditating in the forest, and the significance of this representation lies in that the Vedic age was itself a period of much social turmoil, and the adoption of a life of mendicancy in the forest was a way of escape from the fret of social life. Moreover, this was also a reaction against growing industrialisation and urbanisation that were leading to the depletion of nature and wildlife, since in the Vedic age, humans lived in harmony with nature, and pantheism was very rampant.

In the Vedic age, there was harmony between humans and nature, since nature and forests were considered as common property of the entire society, and there was a collective understanding that it was the duty of the community to protect the forest. This was signified by a symbiotic relationship with the forest and the observance of rituals and worship of trees, animals or deities (Vannucci). This harmony and symbiosis were threatened as the concept of collective ownership of nature and forest began to diminish when individual ownership of land evolved.

In India, this was further aggravated by state interventions that began during the British rule, with the establishment of the forest department and the reservation of forests. Thus, forests were exploited and destroyed by the state as well as by those who had the money and power to influence corrupt government officials. On the other hand, the reservation of forest areas took away the forests from tribal communities who had lived in harmony with the forest.

Reaction against the depletion of forests in India can be seen in *Chandamama* through stories in which mendicants and others go to the forest in search of peace and to engage in meditation there.

From *Adventures in the Forest*:

Soon, Govind observed a large number of people heading towards the forest that was a mile away from the village. On inquiry, he learnt that there was a hermit in the forest who sat in a trance for six days of the week. On the seventh day, he was willing to see and bless the people (39).

Meditation with Cats begins as follows:

At the foot of the hill, on the river-bank, lived a hermit. The forest around the hill supplied him with the fruits and vegetables he needed, and the water of the river was pure. The people of the nearby villages were happy to repair his hut from time to time, and they gave him clothes. They would be happy to give anything the hermit would need, but his needs were few. “One night, in his vision, the hermit received a call from his *guru* who lived in the Himalayas” (13).

Sacred Trees and Animals: A Call to Conserve Wildlife

In *Chandamama*, several stories call for the conservation of wildlife in the wake of increasing poaching and other activities resulting in the extinction and endangerment of different species of animals.

In *The Forgotten Advice*, a dying old lion advises his son, “My son, you have nothing to fear from any beast of the forest, but beware of men who visit our forest from time to time” (62).

However, the young lion decides to teach a lesson to men as soon as he got a chance. One day, the young lion sees a duck trying to hide inside a bush. He asks the duck,

“Wait a minute. What are you scared of?”

The duck replies, “A man. He was aiming his arrow at me”

Hearing this, the lion commands the duck, “This is the creature I wish to see. Lead me to the place where you saw him”

So, the duck, very reluctantly, leads the lion on the way. Soon, a horse comes galloping from the opposite side of the path. The inexperienced lion asks the horse, “I don’t suppose you are a man”

The horse replies, “I am a horse, scared of men. I served them for years. They have nothing for me but the whip. At last, I have escaped!”

The lion boastfully says, “I am out to teach a lesson to him”

“Thanks, but I’d rather go the opposite way (62),” says the horse, and he gallops away. The young lion had just come out to the narrow road that meandered by the forest when his eyes fell on a man. The man at once bowed to the lion and said, ‘Long live the king!’

“Who are you?” asked the lion.

“I am a poor carpenter, my lord,” said the man.

“I see. I thought you are a man. Where are you going?” asked the lion.

“I have just built a nice little house for any great animal of the forest to dwell in it” said the carpenter. “It is close by, my lord. You may be pleased to inspect it”

The carpenter leads the lion to a cage he had just built. The lion enters it and nods and says, “It seems all right. I can relax here for a change”

The carpenter shut the cage and began drawing it.

‘Where are you taking me?’ asked the lion” (63).

“To our king. I am a man, for your information. Our king will be happy to have you in his zoo. I expect a handsome reward” (64), says the carpenter.

It was too late for the lion to remember his late lamented father’s last advice.

The story above clearly represents human beings as a threat to other creatures.

There are also several stories in *Chandamama* that present nature and wildlife as sacred. Hermits and pantheism were common features of the Vedic society. The stories in *Chandamama*, through the recurring representation of hermits in the forest and nature and wildlife as sacred, not only show an inclination towards pantheism, but also reflect reaction against industrialisation and urbanisation accompanied by deforestation, and extinction and endangerment of wildlife, that were contrary to the Vedic period

when nature and wildlife were worshiped and considered as the best means to attain spiritual enlightenment.

A marked tendency in the Vedic age was a growing perception of unity between the various gods and the consequent rise of pantheistic ideas. “Popular festivals were held in honour of Indra, Skanda, Rudra, Mukunda, or demons, or *yaksas*, or snakes, or in honour of a tomb or shrine, or a tree, hill, cave, well, tank, pond, river, lake, or sea (Pande 319).

Nature was to be understood as a friend, revered as mother, obeyed as father, and nurtured as a beloved child. Nature was sacred because man depended entirely on it, and because of this, everything was sanctified, including man, and the terrifying aspects of nature itself, such as glaciers, landslides, earthquakes, storms, that had to be taken as they were, even if difficult to bear. Natural phenomena were manifestations or expressions of the gods (Vannucci 62 – 63).

Trees occupied a high place in Vedic society, and trees were worshiped. Different trees were worshiped during different seasons. The great trees of the forest are referred to as Vanaspati in the *Vedas*, meaning “Lord of the forest.” Moreover, the worship of trees was related to the Vedic myth of the Kalpavriksha, a tree that granted any wish to anyone who sat under it, which was taken away from Earth to Indra’s paradise since greedy humans began to misuse the tree. Moreover, the *Rigveda* contains a hymn on the lady of the forest, Aranyani. Before taking anything from the forest, people in the Vedic age prayed to this deity, and only then did they enter the forest, since they believed the deity would otherwise punish them. Moreover, a significant part of appeasement of the deity was that whenever any item in the forest was collected or allowed to be grazed upon, that item was harvested moderately, with gratitude, and leaving enough in place for conservation and replacement (Vannucci).

Besides the celestial gods and wood-land deities, the people worshiped various kinds of lowly beings like the shades of the departed, evil spirits, and various animals such as elephants, horses, cows, dogs and crows. A vague and variable polytheism which merged imperceptibly into polydemonism constituted popular theology (Pande 319).

In *The King and the Monkeys*, a king receives advice from a “noble monkey”:

The king asks the monkey, “Noble monkey, why did you risk your life so others might escape?”

“I am their leader,’ replied the monkey. ‘It is the right of a leader to enjoy the respect and honour of his followers, but he must also earn that respect by guarding them in times of danger, even at the risk of his own life’ (18).

The king suddenly realised what a selfish life he had led and how he had neglected his people. He took the monkey to his palace to live with him.

The Kind Little Sister is about a young girl who escapes from a disaster due to her kindness towards a snake, while her sisters suffer an ill fate because of their rudeness towards the snake.

In the story, three sisters decide to go fishing. They take with them a kind of edible root called *taro* to consume when they felt hungry. They set out on a forest path. After some time, the elder sister, walking slightly ahead of the others, comes across a snake on the path. The snake says it is very hungry, and requests the girl to chew some of the root and provide it to the snake. However, the girl says, “Certainly not. My food is not for anything as nasty as a snake,” and she walks away.

The second sister also behaves in the same manner at snake’s request.

Finally, the third sister arrives, and she, unlike her two sisters, is kind towards the snake after listening to its request. She sits down beside the snake and chews the root until it is soft enough for the snake to eat. The snake eats some of the root and satisfies its hunger. Upon coming to know from the girl that she is going to the river to fish, the snake says, “Well, here is a piece of advice that you would be wise to listen. When you hear the noise of thunder once in the heavens, you can fish, but if you hear the noise of thunder twice, then climb the nearest hill as fast as you can” (17).

On reaching the river, the girl does not find her sisters there. So, she settles down by the bank and casts out her fishing line. Suddenly, she hears a roll of thunder, and remembering what the snake told her, continues fishing. However, soon there is a second roll of thunder, and the sky becomes very dark. Suddenly, rain starts to pour down, and the water rapidly rises in the river. Remembering the snake’s advice, the girl catches hold of the basket of fish caught and hurriedly climbs onto a nearby hill. As she watches, she sees below huge trees getting uprooted and swept down by the water and animals rushing for shelter. After the rain ceases and the flood water drains away reasonably, she runs down and frantically searches for her sisters, shouting out their names, but in vain.

The snake which had advised the girl slithers out of the undergrowth and asks her, “Well, where are your sisters?”

“I do not know” replies the girl, with tears in her eyes, “perhaps they have been swept out to sea by the great flood”

“No doubt they have” says the snake, “but if only they had been kind to me when I begged for food, perhaps they would be here now” (18).

To thank the snake for warning her, the little girl gives it two large fish from her basket. Gripping the fish in its mouth, the snake slithers back into the undergrowth and disappears.

In *The Tiger, Monkey, and the Snake*, a man saves a tiger, monkey, snake and also a man from a well. While the three creatures show their gratefulness to the man by helping him when he is in trouble, the man turns out to be ungrateful wretch. Thus, in *Chandamama*, the figure of the hermit residing or departing to the forest constitutes a pastoral image of the Vedic life of harmonious existence between humans and nature. Such a trend in *Chandamama* was recurring in the latter 20th century, post-Independence India that was undergoing much deforestation and depletion of nature as a result of increasing industrialisation and urbanisation. *Chandamama* also presents nature and wildlife as sacred. This is often seen in the stories in *Chandamama* through the depiction of different creatures of the forest as having special powers that they use for the benefit of humans who serve them or behave kindly towards them. Thus, *Chandamama* tried to instil among its child readers a love and nurturing mentality towards nature and its wildlife and other resources through the depiction of the holy hermit's pantheistic life in the pastoral forest, and also through stories about divine interventions by nature / creatures of the forest, to the aid of humans who live in harmony with nature. Thus, in the context of increasing industrialisation and urbanisation in post-Independence India that was causing deforestation and the depletion of wildlife, *Chandamama* comic books, through its depiction of a Vedic society in which humans lived in mutual harmony with nature, attempted to instil among its young readers a nature towards nurturing and protecting nature.

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