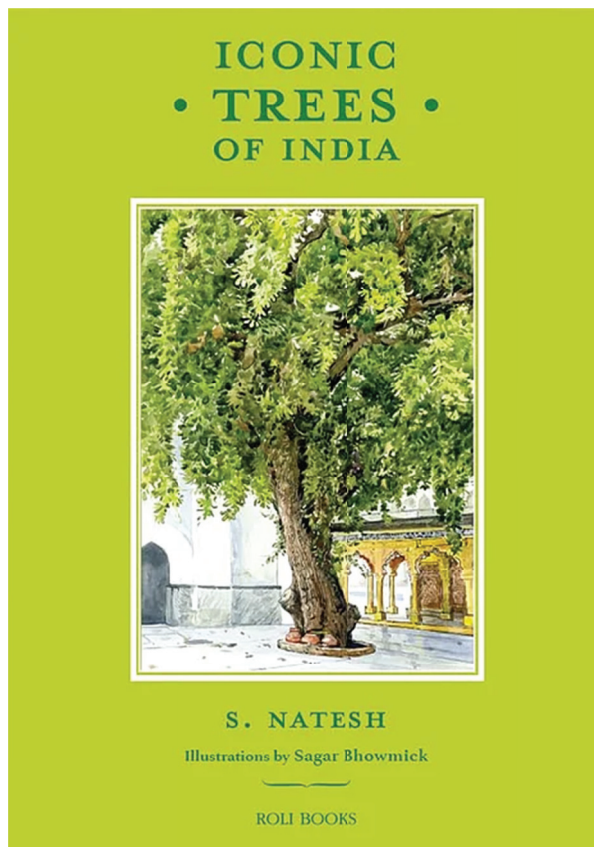


Iconic Trees of India

Natesh S. Illustrations by Sagar Bhowmick. Published by Roli Books, Delhi, India. Hardbound.
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Outliving even tortoises, trees are one of the most fascinating living organisms on Earth. Evolved to endure environmental challenges, they have taken on spectacular forms and sizes. Some tower to dizzy heights, while others have girths so wide that it takes several people to encircle it. Many spread their canopies across hundreds of square feet. These silent giants often stand guard for centuries, with California's redwoods living for as long as 2000 years.

Many of these trees have stood witness to the gore and glory of human actions. Some have observed the birth of new religions, while others have seen the emergence of nations. Yet, there are those

that not only witnessed but helplessly abetted the tyranny of invading powers. Long after the dust has settled, with both the oppressed and oppressor gone, many of these trees remain standing stoically in the very place where history was made. Visiting such iconic trees, spending time under their shade, and reflecting on the events that these trees silently witnessed can be an overwhelming experience.

Iconic Trees of India by S. Natesh offers readers a chance to do just that—and beautifully so. Over the course of a decade, Natesh traversed the length and breadth of India to identify iconic trees that have marked the passage of time and shaped India's history. A botanist by training and with a penchant for history, Natesh brings these historical events to life through the stories of these remarkable trees in a manner so captivating that it might inspire you to visit these sites. His book invites readers to relive the history in silent communion with these living witnesses.

I was born in Jabalpur and recently visited the city for work. Little did I know of a peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) nearby in Sleemanabad, which was used by Colonel Sleeman to hang scores of men referred to as "thugs" by the East India Company back in 1826. Although the branch used for the hangings may have fallen off, the tree, now over 220 years old, still stands, carrying with it the weight of history, of course, for no fault of its own. While we cannot sit in judgment on the rightness and wrongness of these actions, simply reflecting on the events that occurred at the peepal tree, which served as gallows, is enough to turn our stomachs and grieve for the departed souls.

Strange as it may appear, peepal and banyan trees have often been unwitting witnesses to grim episodes of history, repeatedly sought by the British as sites of executions. Among the many unfortunate victims was Sangolli Rayanna of Kittur in Karnataka, a valiant warrior and follower of the famous Rani Chenamma, who was hanged by the British from a banyan tree while valiantly defending the place from falling into the colonial hands. Another haunting tale comes from Barielly in Uttar Pradesh, where a banyan tree bore witness to the execution of 257 freedom fighters during the 1857 uprising. Perhaps it was the strong, horizontally spread branches of these trees that made them convenient for such grim purposes. Yet, this tree now carries the weight of history, serving as a living memorial to the courage and sacrifice of those who fought against oppression.

Not all stories are as grim as the banyan trees that were used for hanging. Away from the bustling Wagah border between India and Pakistan, lies a lesser-known border post in Jammu, situated along the former Jammu-Sialkot Road. From the post, Lahore is merely 140 km away. On either side of the border, the respective armies diligently patrol their territories. The zero line, officially known as the Radcliffe line, named after the British officer who famously drew the line sitting in faraway London, demarcating the boundary between the two countries, is marked by concrete pillars bearing serial numbers. Natesh draws attention to an amusing observation regarding these pillars. At one spot, a peepal tree growing on the zero line, oblivious of the absurdity of such man-made lines, had encircled pillar number 918 completely swallowing it within its trunk. Nearby stands pillar number 919, alone and untouched. To compensate for the loss of pillar 918, the Indian Army displayed foresight by painting the number 918 on the poor peepal and letting it be. I missed noticing this unique sight during my two earlier visits to the Jammu border.

From relating the rich story of the Mahabodhi tree that saw the birth of Buddhism in the country to the tree that Mahatma Gandhi planted to commemorate his visit to a school, from the Rumph fig that likely bore witness to the persecution of prisoners in the cellular jail of the Andaman Islands to the Primavera tree that was planted as a memorial to Sir C.V. Raman at the Raman Research Institute, here is a book that takes you to all corners of India to share with you the painstaking research Natesh undertook to uncover long forgotten histories tied to these remarkable trees.

Once in a while the botanist in Natesh emerges to share stories of a few iconic trees celebrated for their botanical curiosity or sheer splendor. Among them is the Baobab tree, locally known as *Hatiyon ka Jhad*, near the ruins of the Golconda Fort in Hyderabad. Estimated to be about 475 years old, the tree predates the fort itself and is believed to be the largest baobab tree outside Africa. Thanks to its weird structure which is also referred to as the upside-down tree, the tree has been widely introduced in India and many other tropical countries. Equally fascinating are the living root bridges of Meghalaya, formed from the aerial roots of the Indian rubber tree (*Ficus elastica*). Human ingenuity to cross streams and rivers in far-flung places in Meghalaya by training the roots of the tree across the rivers, sometimes even spanning 52 m wide and reaching up to 24 m above the water surface is, as Natesh describes, a green engineering marvel.

In all, Natesh offers a captivating collection of 75 iconic trees, representing 47 species from all parts of India. Unsurprisingly, a number of stories are related to *Ficus*, either Peepal (*F. religiosa*) or banyan (*F. benghalensis*). These trees have been at the core of India's culture, religion, and customs for time immemorial. Their wide distribution throughout India has only enabled them to be present at pivotal moments of history. The stories are both sublime and enchanting, filled with symbolism of life and interconnectedness.

So, what could have been done better? Well for one, I think a paperback edition would have been ideal for travellers to carry on their trips. Maybe this is already planned. The introductory section that covers 43 of the book's 253 pages is informative for a curious reader. However, if you find it a little bit overwhelming, you can simply move on to page 47! The excellent artwork by Mr. Sagar Bhowmick adds to the richness of the stories. That said, including some photographs of the trees in the places where history was made could have elevated the sensory experiences even more.

In summary, this is perhaps the only book of its kind in the country that brings to us the rich cultural and historical context in which trees find themselves. The book is highly readable and appeals to a wide audience, including lay readers, tree enthusiasts, historians, botanists and more. But hurry to get your copy-most of the trees described are already very old and may not wait for you forever!

R. Uma Shaanker

Former Professor,
University of Agricultural Sciences,
GKVK, Bangalore, India