Plant Lives: Borderline Beings in Indian Traditions (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS


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Reading Plant Lives: Borderline Beings in Indian Traditions by Ellison Banks Findly may at first seem an irritating experience for a Sanskrit scholar, since it appears to look in a seemingly uncritical way at many instances, taken from all sorts of texts (medical, kāvya, religious, mythologic, folkloric, etc.) in which the view is held that plants are living beings and, hence, are deserving of respect. After reflection, however, this may be seen as a positive aspect of the book, since it introduces Sanskritists to environmental ethics and makes environmental activists aware of Sanskrit sources that they might use while advocating (in India or elsewhere) on behalf of that portion of the environment occupied by plants. Hence, if one shares the fundamental goal of environmental conservation, this book is not just an interesting study; it represents a positive step toward achieving this goal.

Let me begin by outlining the purpose of the book. Most of the criticism that it may raise is indeed linked to what we would like it to be about. The author, instead, states clearly:

In this study, I hope to show that many of the things that are on our minds today about plants were also on the minds of traditional thinkers in early and medieval India, in ways that had clarity and precision then and that can be appreciated as such now. Moreover, the doctrines about plants developed in traditional religious and philosophical circles in India continue to provide formative and grounding material for activist work there undertaken by individuals and groups today. (pp. xxix–xxx; emphasis added)

I hope not to force too much of my own interpretation on the author’s intent if I try to bridge the first and the second statements and sum up the book as showing only those “doctrines about plants developed in traditional religious and philosophical circles in India” that can “provide formative and grounding material for activist work there undertaken by individuals and groups today.” This means that the author is interested not in a general discussion about plants in Indian culture, but instead in a very selective study of how plants are perceived by different groups within the larger Indian tradition:

Being a “borderline case” suggests . . . that in each of the traditions . . . there are a variety of views about plants and that, while we have focused on those texts and passages that we might call “plant-positive,” many texts, thinkers, and movements pay no attention to plants at all—or may hold dismissive views. Borderline, then, here suggests that the case on behalf of plants is highly selective and may not represent a whole tradition’s view. . . . (p. 410; emphasis added).
Accordingly, Findly basically dedicates the whole first part (pp. 1–266) and half of the second (pp. 267–336) to this process of selection from so-called “Hindu,” Buddhist, and Jaina views, of all which can be regarded as “positive” toward plants and can be applied in contemporary environmentalist movements.

The third part (pp. 407–574) is dedicated to (1) the actualization of these themes in the work of selected Indian spiritual teachers of the present time, and (2) the way Indian and Indian-inspired activists have used these ideas in their environmentalist work. However, “environmentalism” itself is not a neutral “frame.” (In a different context, Findly quotes John Cort saying that environmentalism is, together with scientific methods, Copernican astronomy, nationalism, industrial capitalism, globalization, feminism, social justice, human rights, etc., “one of the several new epistemes to which the world’s religious traditions have had to respond in recent centuries” [John Cort, Green Jainism? p. 66; quoted on p. 479].)

Findly’s adoption of the environmentalist point of view is overt. The second chapter of part 2 (pp. 337–406) is called “Plant Rights and Human Duties” and starts with the following words: “We now move from traditional understandings of what is to what should be” (p. 337; emphasis original). “What should be” is exemplified by the views of environmental ethicists such as Paul Taylor, Christopher Stone, Peter Singer, and James A. Nash. But Findly does not simply record their views; she connects them with the Indian background, again showing how Indian classical themes may be used in today’s call for an environmental ethic. Moreover, she proposes further environmentalist developments of Indian themes. For instance, she suggests that the traditional understanding of plants as related to tamas-guna, one of the three traditional “threads” out of which the whole cosmos is made—corresponding, respectively, to dullness (tamas), activity (rajas), and clarity (sattva)—could be reversed in favor of plants. Their fixedness could in fact be read as a manifestation of sattva rather than tamas, and interpreted in a positive way as possessing the faculty of not being disturbed by outer events and maintaining one’s own inner calm. Further, plants can represent sattva insofar as they bestow their gifts on everyone, without regard for reciprocation.

The Challenge of Metaphors

This link to sattva is an interesting re-reading of a traditional motif and may be useful for an appreciation of Indian cultures by contemporary Indians (or scholars of India) focused on the problem of plant preservation. Findly seems to suggest from time to time that this view is already available in Indian texts: “We note also that for modern Jains, plants can be . . . that class of living [things] who are models for human perfection, for, as in Buddhism, forest trees can be looked upon as saints, or more specifically, trees can be interpreted as sattva beings” (p. 500; emphasis original). The evidence she offers is not, however, totally convincing. Buddhist texts that refer to trees as “saints” do indeed see trees as models for saintly human behavior, insofar as they are models for deep meditation. But these texts do not see trees themselves as saintly beings.
More generally, the author seems to overstate metaphorical usage as evidence of conscious sensitivity in plants. Many pages are, consequently, devoted to similes such as that of a creeper around a tree and the arms of a young girl “chained around my neck” (Caurapañcaśikā, quoted on p. 291), and that of the trees moved by winds in the Rāmāyana, which rustle and seem “almost . . . to weep” (Rāmāyana, quoted on p. 298). Such literary flourishes ultimately prove, Findly argues, that “trees can be reanimated back to life as humans can be . . .”; trees can make decisions, trees can dance and can express love, eroticism, and delight; and, finally, trees can hear teaching and respond, as the Lotus Sūtra’s Parable of the Herbs so aptly shows” (p. 300). But trees do not themselves express love et cetera; it is rather up to the poets to read human qualities into vegetal ones.1 Similarly, one species of willow (introduced to North America from China) is called “Weeping Willow” not because it is believed to be grieving for something, but because its branches, bent downwards, remind us of our human response to grief.

Findly stresses the importance of these similes for the sake of today’s environmentalism. In a similar vein, a Thai monk speaks about his idea of performing “tree ordinations” in order to safeguard trees, as follows:

If a tree is wrapped in saffron robes, no one would dare cut it down. So I thought that perhaps this idea could be used to discourage logging and I began performing ceremonies on trees in the forest near the temple. I called the ritual an “ordination” to give it more weight. The term “tree ordination” sounds weird to Thai people since an ordination is a ritual applied only to men. This weirdness has helped spread the news by word of mouth. (Phrakhru Manas, quoted on p. 521)

Thus, the Thai Buddhist monks whose views are reported in the book are aware of the usefulness of Buddhist symbols “to build villagers’ commitment to . . . ecology projects” (p. 521, quoting Susan M. Darlington, The Ordination of a Tree: The Buddhist Ecology Movement in Thailand).

To achieve success, a book like this one must evoke a universal sympathetic attitude toward nature, but the overuse of the kinds of metaphors offered here may end up turning away those readers who might otherwise respond more favorably to a more realistic approach. Lambert Schmithansen’s works on Buddhism and nature, and specifically Buddhism and plants, may be more convincing precisely because they carefully examine also the arguments against the sentience of plants that are offered in later Buddhism, together with their Pāli pre-history.

The Sentience of Plants

The evidence in favor of conscious sensitivity in plants constitutes the philosophical core of the book. The author has assembled an impressive collection of quotations and textual evidence from a variety of sources that include the Vedas, the Buddhist Pāli Canon, the Jain Canon, literary epics, Sanskrit and Tamil kāvya, the Dharmaśāstras, Vṛksāyurveda (phytotherapy), Āyurveda, and folktales. Collectively, these present a
strong argument in favor of the view that the sentience of plants was commonly assumed, notwithstanding the cautions mentioned above concerning the overuse of metaphor. Thus, much of the traditional Indian teachings can be of some use in today’s campaigns for the preservation of plants.

But, what are plants? Could they have been conceived by the Indian traditions in exactly the same way as in the (basically Western) contemporary world? The author does not directly address this problem, but some indirect information can be extracted from some of the texts she quotes—and from passages that, perhaps intentionally, she does not. The category “plant,” thus, may end up appearing less uncontroversial than one might initially assume. On the one hand, “plants” do not constitute a coherent whole in the Indian view; on the other hand, what we consider to be “plants” are not always sharply distinguished from what we would rather call “animals” or “matter.” Similar problems arise within the common Western understanding of plants as well, in cases where the layperson may be confused by something unfamiliar. For example, to the nonspecialist, corals may be considered as plants because of their “plant-like” appearance, and phytoplankton (minute oceanic plant life) may be considered to consist of animals, because it moves through the oceans. Similarly, we can detect some ambiguity over what we would call “plants” in the Indian traditions. First, in many texts, especially the Vedic and early Jain, “plants” are seen as sentient beings insofar as they are part of a cosmos which is in all its aspects conceived as alive. In this case, plants are part of the same organic continuum that embraces all the elements of the universe. Second, in other texts, plants (especially trees) are associated with deities. The exact link between a plant and the deity inhabiting it is not easy to ascertain, especially because one has to understand it from within the context of a narrative or religious text. A deity often seems to be conceived as inseparable from a tree, for example, although in other, possibly later, cases it is said to be able to leave one tree and move into another. In any case, it cannot live outside a plant, except while moving from one tree to the other. In some cases, again possibly later developments, plant deities seem to be anthropomorphized as having limbs, producing children, and so on. Gleaning what one can from the ancient texts that have survived, one wonders whether a plant later said to be inhabited by a deity was originally thought of as an actual deity itself, or as the body of a deity and not just the place where it resided.

Third, not all plants are equal. Almost all of the texts quoted by Findly (including relatively recent ones) take for granted the higher status of trees (often called vanaspati), and both Vṛksāyurveda and contemporary activities aimed at benefiting plants focus on the preservation of trees. From a different standpoint, the parts of plants associated with generation (e.g., seeds, sprouts, blossoms) are deemed to deserve greater respect in Jain and Early Buddhist texts.

Fourth, it is probably no accident that a discussion of philosophical texts is altogether missing in this book. In fact, in many such texts, one witnesses a sort of “rationalistic” attitude against the evidence in favor of the sentience of plants, for example in Dharmaśāstra and narrative texts; one sometimes gets the impression that this is a
reaction against popular beliefs. Philosophical texts seem to be offering a neutral, rational view as opposed to a folkloric one. A Prabhakara Mīmāṃsā primer (Rāmānujacārya’s Tantraratnāsya), for instance, counts plants as living beings, but denies that they could experience (bhoga), thus excluding them from the realm of karman-bound creatures. Later Buddhist texts even state that plants are not living things and classify them on the same level as earth and rock.²

Lastly, it is difficult to define the exact nature of common beliefs favorable to plants. The texts indicate two somewhat conflicting attitudes, one that considers plants to be the lowest class of living beings (so that eating them is ethically sanctioned), and the other that regards some trees and other special plants as sacred and worthy of honor and respect. Evidence of the latter can be found in Tribal and non-mainstream Indian traditions (see pp. 302–318).

About Plant-speciesism

Opinions about the status of plants differ even among contemporary ethicists. Peter Singer, for instance, maintains that plants do not suffer (see p. 364). This claim has major implications, since Singer is a proponent of anti-speciesism: “Speciesism . . . is a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (Singer, Animal Liberation, p. 6; quoted on p. 363). The boundaries between species can be overcome, Singer follows, if one stops asking whether other living beings can reason, but rather asks whether they can suffer. Hence, since plants are said not to suffer, one might argue that Singer is just substituting an older speciesism with a newer one and that his work does not constitute a “complete change in our attitudes to nonhumans” (ibid., p. 135; quoted on p. 362), but only to animals.

Findly participates in this debate, taking the side of plants, and she uses Indian traditional motifs in order to argue for the inclusion of plants among sentient beings, at least at a lower stage of consciousness, and thus capable of suffering. She even hints at the idea of the spiritual superiority of plants. How can one argue in favor of this seemingly odd view? Through this fact that plants do not accumulate new karman. In fact, it is difficult to make the case that plants can choose to act in one way or another. But this does not necessarily entail the conclusion sketched in the Mīmāṃsā text mentioned above. In fact, Findly argues, plants could even be considered spiritually emancipated souls, consuming their last karman in their present vegetal existence (p. 249).

As suggested above, this book is not about the history of a philosophical concept, but rather an essay in applied philosophy. Still, one is left with many doubts about the feasibility of a program of nonviolence applied to plants as a whole, that is, to all sorts of plants without any sort of hierarchical distinction, as the author implies (p. xi). One might argue, for instance, that in order to plant a tree one needs to clear the weeds from the spot where it is to be planted. However, preferring trees to weeds might itself be an example of speciesism, where trees are regarded as much more useful than weeds for our own survival and well-being.
Notes

1 – I am grateful to my colleague Sara Rella for her reflections on this point.

2 – This conclusion may strike a contemporary reader as unusual, since growth is, for us, positive evidence of life, but the parallel of crystals may help us to conceive of growing substances that are in fact inert. In Western philosophy, one is reminded of René Descartes’ position about animals, which may appear as though they are expressing emotion, but are actually just “machines.” In fact, we do not know that animals (and, even less, plants) express emotion. We can only infer this based on similarities with human behavior, but the counter-example of a robot displaying a similar behavior (tears, cries, etc.) without actually feeling anything at all, always applies.


Reviewed by Aaron B. Creller  University of Hawai‘i

Steve Coutinho’s _Zhuangzi and Early Chinese Philosophy: Vagueness, Transformation and Paradox_, is a comparative philosophy project masterfully carried out on two levels, the methodological and the interpretive. Coutinho provides a translation of the _Zhuangzi_ that is both contextually rooted and philosophically rich. Whether or not one agrees with Coutinho’s interpretation, there is much to be gleaned from his book. The first few chapters create a meta-philosophical structure that the rest of the book puts to use. Given the lucid movement from development to application, there is something here for both the newcomer to comparative philosophy and those well versed in Warring States Chinese philosophy. To readers in comparative philosophy, Coutinho’s writing is an excellent example of exploring a topic while putting resources from different time periods and cultures to work on their own terms. Sorites paradoxes, debates about the meaning of ming 明, and Vienna Circle writings on indeterminacy all make appearances as the author develops a description of vagueness that resonates with the _Zhuangzi_ and opens up a new interpretation of it.

The first, introductory chapter justifies both the author’s methodological approach to the _Zhuangzi_ and the other texts being referenced, as well as broadly laying out the role of terms crucial to his reading, such as “vagueness” and “clarity,” in Western and Chinese Warring States philosophy. The next two chapters explore issues of textual context and translator/interpreter context. Chapter 2 describes Zhuang Zhou as a historicized author, contextualizing him through Sima Qian’s biography and the literary tradition that arises from it, as well as the political and philosophical environment of the states of Song and Chu. Following this placement of the author in Chu, Coutinho then employs current studies from mainland China to provide a description of Chu culture and philosophy. Here he also provides a working vocabulary of Daoist language and imagery important in later chapters, such as the description of reflection on nature, _tian_ 天, and its processes as the “means by which the sage