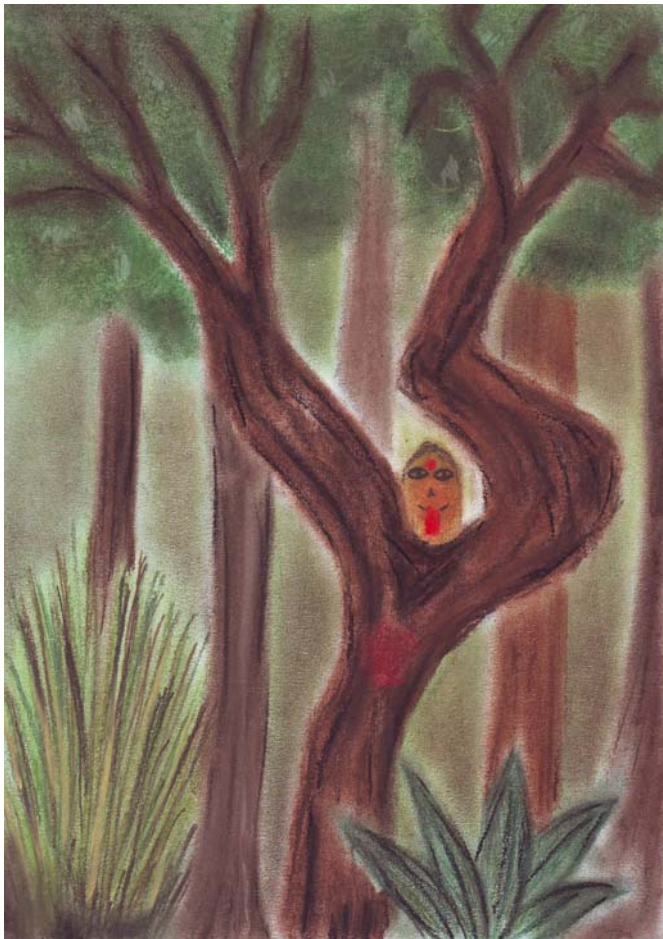


# The Sacred Grove of Sitabaidevi

An environmental story from India,  
retold by Muriel Kakani.

The Mother Goddess presided over the sacred grove. Her name was Sitabaidevi. She rested in the fork of an old gnarled jamun tree. With her long black staring eyes and her huge red tongue sticking out of her mouth, she looked ferocious. Everybody feared her.



The sacred grove of Sitabaidevi consisted of a small patch of forest that had been left undisturbed for thousands of years. In her grove stood magnificent trees that had been allowed to live for eternity and rare medicinal plants that had been left to proliferate. Nobody dared to cut a tree, pluck a fruit, pick a flower or hunt animals in Sitabaidevi's domain. Even lifting a twig was enough to upset the Mother Goddess and could bring terrible misery upon the offender.

In a village not too far from the sacred grove lived the greatest devotee of Śitabaidevi. Everyday he worshiped the deity, made offerings of sweets, and prayed to become wealthy.

After years of devotion to the Mother Goddess, his wish was at last granted and the loyal devotee grew to be extremely rich.

Dressed in a gold embroidered kurta and a diamond embedded turban, he walked to the sacred grove followed by a procession of servants carrying all kinds of valuable offerings. He wanted to show his gratitude to the Mother Goddess.

“Oh Śitabaidevi,” he said, bowing at the goddess. “This grove of tangled bushes, trees covered in moss, dead wood thronging the ground, fruits rotting at your feet doesn’t look very impressive. I want to clear this patch of useless jungle and build for you the most magnificent temple ever. I want that people from all over India come and worship you.”

The devotee called the woodcutters and ordered them to start the work at once. “First clear the ground by uprooting the brambles and bracken. Then chop down those lofty sal trees. They obstruct the sunlight.”

At once the workmen picked up their tools. As the axes of the woodcutters crashed into the mighty trunks, the deity roared her anger. In an instant the opulent man who had been dressed in rich outfits found himself clothed in rags. His jewels, his diamonds, his priceless offerings had all evaporated.

“Foolish man! How could you think that wealth gave you the right to rule over nature?” hollered Śitabaidevi. How could you think that felling these sacred trees would please me? Haven’t you ever thought about the services provided by these trees to your

village? Thanks to them you get rain in time. Thanks to them you get fresh air to breath. Thanks to them you are alive.”

“I am sorry. I didn’t know,” muttered the devotee. He got up and went back to his palace that had by now turned into a hovel.

After that, the devotee never dared again to harm a tree or even a plant. In fact he became the most sincere protector of the sacred grove.