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Wars, Trees and the Struggle for Peace

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*People who will not sustain
trees will
soon live in a world that will
not sustain
people
Bryce Nelson*

Abstract

The historical, spiritual, environmental and humanistic properties of trees are recognized worldwide. As a matter of fact, the recognition of their value as an asset to the entire humanity has increased with the passage of time. Their importance has been highlighted not only by the holy books and spiritual leaders of different religions but also by the story tellers, poets, novelists, painters, film makers, medicine manufacturers, and environmental activists. With the growing awareness of the causes and consequences of climate change, proliferating scientific studies

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have been projecting tree plantation and forestation as an existential need. However, the ruination of trees due to wars and violence doesn't seem to have received as much global attention as it should have. Perhaps it won't be an exaggeration to say that a comprehensive peace perspective on the trees hasn't been fully developed yet. The destruction of hundreds of thousands of trees in wars and violence are rarely noticed, and voices affirming that the trees also have a right to life and protection in wars and warlike situations as humans are supposed to have are still very mute. This paper discusses the sufferings of the trees as wars victims. It emphasizes the need for a worldwide campaign in favor of the basic rights of the trees and asks as to how can the campaign for the rights of the trees be converted into a powerful agency and how can the worldwide struggle for peace benefit from such an agency.

Key Words: Violence against Trees; Peace Trees and their Stories; Climate Change; Bodhi Peace Trees; Hiroshima Peace Trees; New International Peace Movement and Trees

Introduction

The commonality between humans and trees is striking. Both are living beings; both have a strong sense of community - living and community – building; and both enjoy giving and sharing and promoting common good. Likewise, both have a long history of suffering neglect, vulnerability, genocide and ruination in wars and war-like situations. What differentiates one from another is the fact that while concerned people all over the world talk about the fundamental rights, including the right to life and peace, for the humans, not many talk about the fundamental right of the trees for life and peace. Again, voices of the humans are often heard, recorded, documented and channeled into organized mass movements against war, violence, militarism and extremism, voices of the grieving trees have generally remained unheard and least attended to. Not many listen to the painful and angry voices of the trees caught in the midst of war and violence, and fewer raise their voice in support of the fundamental rights of the trees.

True enough that the Chipko Movement was launched in 1973 in India to resist commercial logging and deforestation (Pathak, 2020). As a grassroots activism where the villagers embraced trees to prevent their felling, it did draw global attention toward the insecurity of trees. Likewise, the Green Belt Movement, started in 1977 in Kenya under the leadership Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai, to boost environmental conservation and empower women through tree planting drew the attention of the people toward the power and powerlessness of

trees. Again, a number of studies have also highlighted the importance of large-scale tree plantation for climate protection (Bonan, 2023). These and several other initiatives have considerably aroused interest in the past, present and future of trees in international discourses. However, it is generally in the context of environmental debates and scientific investigations that some space has been provided to the trees on the margins of climate change debates. Similarly, the studies on destructions caused by war and violence usually focus on destructions caused to the humans and infrastructure of affected countries. Even the studies and research reports on damages inflicted on trees and forests usually discuss the impact in the context of regional and global ecosystems (Smith, 2017; Martin, 2023).

Interestingly enough, a crucial issue - an issue central to the fundamental rights of the trees and asking for urgent attention and solid response - is usually evaded, bypassed or lightly dealt with by such studies and campaigns. The issue, in brief, is this: why should the trees be destroyed and massacred in war and violence when they do nothing to instigate, ignite or escalate war and violence between and within the states; and why aren't the grievances of the trees expressed much more loudly and emphatically in the UN and other international forums, where the issues of war and violence are discussed regularly. To be fair, one may perhaps add that well-researched, fully focused, and path-breaking studies on the right of the trees to life, protection and growth and on the peace teaching, peace promoting, and peacebuilding capacity, potential, and role of the trees are still awaited.

This paper is a modest attempt in this direction. It focuses on the issues mentioned above. While it appreciates the recent campaigns to grow more trees everywhere to counter the threats to local, national and international ecosystems, it aims to move beyond the usual discussion on trees in the context of environmental degradation and insecurity. It concentrates on the wider and somewhat neglected or unhighlighted issues like the militarization of trees and their annihilation in war and violence and their right to life and peace. Divided into three parts, the first discusses the age old practice of using trees for military purposes and destroying the trees in wars and violence; the second offers glimpses from the peace history of trees; and the concluding part emphasizes the need to highlight the peace history and memory of trees and explore the likelihood of a more robust and impactful role of trees in the struggle for peace in these exceptionally challenging, tormenting and dangerous times.

Militarizing and Weaponizing Trees

Most wars, like most ecological upheavals and deadly diseases, usually do not occur all of a sudden. They take time to explode. What is more unfortunate is the fact that the ruination of the humans and trees are often preventable. Furthermore, the decision to go to war is usually taken by a handful of people at the helm of affairs - not more than a few dozens. Such a list may include the leader at the top, his close associates involved in policy making and implementation, some officials enjoying higher positions in the government and in the military, some businessmen, and some warrior religious leaders, intellectuals and journalists. After taking the decision for going to war and plunging into the war, the war is sold to the common people in the name of national honor, national unity, national interest and national security. The common people with no role in the decision-making process are then prepared to suffer the short term and long term consequences of wars. Similarly, a large number of lower ranking combatants on both the sides having nothing to do with the decision to go to war are lured into the war, and brutally used as cannon fodders. In the same way, the trees are used as cannon fodders and disposable commodities in wars though no apology is ever offered for killing and amputating the trees in the wars. At the end of the day and irrespective of who wins or who loses, both the combatants and civilians and the trees and forests and deserts and agricultural lands and industries and roads – on both the sides - pay the price for the decision of a few dozen war mongers and war igniters, and the humans and the ecosystems go on paying the price for a long time.

The use of trees for military purposes and their annihilation in wars and violence are generally little noticed or discussed and rarely regretted or collectively resented and openly condemned. Violence done to the trees are, at best, viewed as a sort of normal practice and the argument put forward is usually very simplistic. It may be summarized thus: 'however unfortunate all this may be, these things had happened in the past and these will continue to happen in the future'. There is clearly a need to hotly contest such a fossilized viewpoint on all forums and launch a campaign for the right of the trees to life, protection and peace as part and parcel of the ongoing struggle against war, militarism and arms trade.

That the trees and forests have always been used for military purposes is a historical fact. It cannot be denied or contested. At the beginning of human settlement on the planet earth, sticks made out of the branches of strong and durable trees, along with stones, were the weapons to be used to repel group assaults and stave off the deadly animals. With the passage of time, new wooden weapons were designed, improvised and fashioned into clubs, spears, slings, bows and arrows and such weapons and their improved versions dominated warfare for a long time. It is estimated that the bows and arrows, which were first used in Asia as a military weapon for more than 2500 years, changed the character of armed conflict

worldwide and it is considered to be the most devastating killer of men in history (Hurley, June 1, 2011). Wood constituted a vital part of this weapon, and it was acquired by cutting the branches of strong and durable trees on a large scale. With the advent of the metal weaponry a few thousand years ago and that of bronze weapons about 5,000 years ago and iron perhaps 3,400 years ago, the use of wood for making new weapons somewhat decreased in stages but not totally abandoned as wood was still needed for new weapons like the shafts of bronze-pointed spears. Furthermore, besides weapons, warfare always required logistic and transport support and for all these wood was required. As a matter of fact, throughout history, warfare impacted on treescapes in different and often catastrophic ways and trees and forests were used as military resources and as terrain (Rotherham, March 2024).

The demand for wood increased manifold when the chariot warfare began. Covering a span of 1,000 years and the vast landmass between Egypt and Britain in the West and China in East – in the areas wherever skills, horses and wood could be arranged together - the chariot warfare required the cutting of strong and durable trees in very large numbers. Likewise, and until the beginning of the use of concrete in the 20th century, wood was abundantly used for about 9,000 years for building forts and shoring up defense preparedness on the borders of the empires and states and around conquered territories in particular (McNeill, July 2024). While the modernization of weapon systems and induction of highly sophisticated and lethal weapons especially since early twentieth century may seem to have reduced dependency on the military use of trees to some extent, it also unleashed new vulnerabilities and insecurities for the trees. Here one may refer to the use of camouflage trees.

The French painter Lucien Victor Guirand De Scevola and leader of the French Army's Section de Camouflage is considered to be one of the inventors of military camouflage along with Eugene Corbin and painter Louis Guingot. At the start of the war in September 1914, De Scevola, who was then serving as a second class gunner, experimentally camouflaged a gun emplacement around a painted canvas screen. Soon after, the idea was taken up by the French Army quite seriously. Its military use was expanded and it was operationalized on a wider scale. De Scevola was made the Commander of the French Camouflage Corps and a number of cubist artists were employed. By 1917, his team had grown into 3,000 and camouflage trees were in full action in different war theatres. Meanwhile, other warring states involved in the war also introduced the camouflage trees in their military planning and operations. Commonly described as a replica of battle-damaged tree, a camouflage tree served as a military observation post. To build such a tree, a military artist would first of all select a tree to sketch in no man's land. Subsequently the sketch was 'used to build an exact hollow replica with a

steel core' and under 'the cover of darkness, the original tree would be cut down and the new metal tree put in its place' (Nelson, April 20, 2024). In other words, for each camouflage tree erected, a living tree was put to death.

Massacring and Ruining the Trees

Along with the weaponization of trees, the massacre of trees has also continued for a long time. However, since the introduction of air war from the First World War on and the intensification and spread of guerrilla warfare soon after the Second World War, the massacre of the humans and trees has reached new heights.

There is no denying the fact that no war is nonkilling. All wars – land wars, naval wars and air wars and religious wars, tribal wars, civil wars, guerrilla wars, and wars of terror and wars on terror - kill and overkill the humans and convert the habitats including natural ecosystems and also towns and cities into killing fields and wastelands. Among them, air war is perhaps the deadliest for the humans and trees and forests. In the form of death and destruction, the bomb was dropped for the first time in the history of warfare from an Italian airplane on an oasis outside Tripoli in Libya on November 1, 1911 (Lindqvist 2001). A year later in 1912, first woman Nobel Peace Laureate Bertha von Suttner wrote prophetically about the barbarization of sky and warned against the potential for aerial warfare and its devastating consequences (van den Dungen, 2024: 150), but the military airplanes carrying death and destruction were put to savage action during the First World War.

In short, the invention of new weapons and enhanced lethality of these and other weapons and application of newer and more lethal war strategies and tactics resulted in mass - killing of the humans and large – scale destruction of infrastructures. In addition, the lands hosting, nurturing and nourishing the trees and forests were converted into vast landmasses of charred and amputated trees and forests. Take, for example, the trench warfare that destroyed the French farmland and countryside. According to Philip Swintek of Fordham University, the 'damage in some areas was so severe that the affects can still be seen today'. He adds: 'Specifically, in the Battle of the Somme, over 250,000 acres of farmland were so severally destroyed that they were deemed unfit for agriculture. Additionally, 494,000 acres of French forest were destroyed as a result of direct conflict during the war' (2006: 4). However, no lessons were to be learnt in France or elsewhere in Europe and beyond, and subsequently the lust for war, resources and power drove the world into Second World War in 1939. This war was more deadly and savage than the previous world war for the humans and the trees.

During the Second World War, the German and Italian bombings as well as bombings by the allied powers caused the death of hundreds of thousands of combatants and civilians, huge destruction of the cities, towns and villages and ruination of trees, forests and soils on a massive scale. For quite a while, attempts were made to conceal the details of destructions caused by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and minimize the extent of destruction caused by the allied forces. Thus the aerial bombings by the Germans on Madrid in the autumn of 1936, of Guernica, of Warsaw and of Rotterdam, the London Blitz, and burning of Coventry were usually spotlighted and the subsequent more devastating attacks unleashed from the sky by the allied forces on the Germans, Italians and later on the Japanese were defended as legitimate military actions (Maier, September 2005: 429-430). However, well – researched studies on the Second World War have begun appearing slowly and the number of serious works has increased manifold during the last seventy years or so.

As a matter of fact, studies, research reports, conference proceedings, theses authored to obtain higher research degrees, memorial lectures and biographies revolving around the Second World War are available in abundance today. These discuss the causes of the outbreak of the war, highlight the distinguishing features of the weapon systems and variety of weapons employed, war strategies and tactics used by different warring parties, and offer critical assessment of the vision, caliber and courage of the leading political and military leadership actively involved in war planning and war campaigns. Likewise, a number of studies focus on wartime diplomacy to keep the coalitions intact and strong, explore ways and means to help the partners in different war theatres, negotiate the knitty - gritty of settlement for sharing the war booties and designing a road map to build a new world order. In addition, there are studies focusing on the territories gained or lost by the warring parties and power and prestige gained or lost by them.

However, studies focusing on the effects of the war on environment and on global and regional ecosystems are not many and those focusing on the ruination of trees and forests in the war are fewer. The situation seems to be somewhat changing. In the recent years, a few good works on warfare and environment have appeared. Among these, one may mention *The Long Shadows: A Global Environmental History of the Second World War*. Published in April 2017. It is considered to be the first book devoted exclusively to the profound and lasting impact of the Second World War on global environments and discusses issues relating to polar, temperate and tropical ecological zones. It is an edited book and it carries several good papers on related issues. One of the chapters is on the costs of the Second World War for the Soviet Union. At one place, the author says (Josephson, 2017):

The German armies attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. They rapidly overwhelmed Soviet forces, destroyed much of the existing Soviet Air Force on the ground, and captured millions of soldiers as the Blitzkrieg moved toward Leningrad, Moscow, the Don River and the Caucasus. Ultimately, they overran approximately 850,000 square kilometers of territory. As the Soviet armies retreated early in the war, they adopted a scorched earth policy, leaving behind fields of stubble and smoldering forests, and they dynamited buildings and factories. The German soldiers continued the war by stripping what was left, surrounding and starving Leningrad, approaching the outskirts of Moscow and reaching Stalingrad, where a horrific battle of block-to-block fighting left only rubble. Virtually no trees remained. Toward the end of the war, their supply lines destroyed, those Nazi armies that managed to flee the pursuing Red Army stripped bare what was left in the war zone. World War II had long – term, wide - ranging impacts across a vast swath of the European Soviet Union.

Among the countries directly and actively involved in warfighting during the Second World War, the Soviet Union was doubtless the most critically affected. It suffered the greatest number of casualties in the war. It lost more than 20 million humans - also identified as citizens. This figure is about one third of all casualties suffered in the war. The Soviet Union also suffered widespread destruction of infrastructure, economic collapse, devastation of ecosystems and annihilation of trees and forests. However, several other countries including France, Germany, UK, Poland, and Japan also suffered large – scale humankilling and huge infrastructural and environmental devastations. For example, during a few hours in the early hours of March 10, 1945, approximately 300 B -29 bombers dropped incendiary bombs on the city of Tokyo, causing a massive firestorm, killing 90,000 to 100,000 human beings and converting thousands of trees into scorched ghosts. Worse still, the atom bombs, dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945, killed humans in hundreds of thousands and destroyed infrastructures, and a large number of trees and parks of the two cities.

While post-1945 North American and European states haven't gone to another big war between and among themselves, a number of third world countries have suffered deadly wars. These include the Korean War, the wars fought in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, between India and Pakistan, Israel and the Arab countries, Iran and Iraq, Iraq and Kuwait and so on. In addition, the US military invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, Russian military invasion of Ukraine, and Israeli military invasion of Gaza and the West Bank and genocide in Gaza and many other

wars fought in Africa and Latin America have caused wholesale destructions. The costs of these wars in terms of casualties and economic loss, destruction of infrastructure and ruination of trees, forests, farmlands, and water resources are enormous. For example, the Vietnam War, which had continued in stages from 1946 to 1975, was disastrous for the Vietnamese people and their country in particular. For eight years – from 1946 to 1954 – the French Indochina war was unleashed on Vietnam by France. This war was diplomatically, financially and materially supported by the US. After the withdrawal of the French forces in 1954, the US moved in. The war between the most powerful military power on earth and a war devastated and militarily far, far weaker country ensued. This war that devastated, impoverished and divided a Southeast Asian country continued from 1954 till the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam in 1975.

During this period and especially from 1960s to mid-70s, the US unleashed ferocious military power to terrorize the Vietnamese people and force the defiant government of Ho Chi Minh to agree to a peace settlement on American terms. This wasn't acceptable to the Hanoi government. As such, the deadliest phase of war ensued between a super power and the Vietnamese guerrilla forces fighting a guerrilla war mainly in the jungles and countryside areas, which caused massive ruination of the country and its resources.

Since the forests of Vietnam had emerged as major battlefields, these became the major targets of US military power. According to a study on the environmental consequences of war, the trees and jungles of Vietnam were trampled and destroyed by the US in different ways. The study says that in order to advance, the infantry was provided 'Rome Plows', powerful bulldozers that could grub up forests and crops. It adds that a 'special six ton bomb, the Daisy Cutter, was also developed, with a shock wave that could instantly create zones for helicopter landing in the middle of the jungle'. Referring to the use of geography and environment sciences to make war, it pointed out that an 'estimated 85 per cent of the ammunitions used by the US Army were targeted not at the enemy but at the environment sheltering them: forests, fields, cattle, water resources, roads and dykes'. It further said: 'Noting the inability of incendiary bombs and napalm to destroy the humid Vietnamese forests, the US Army finally sprayed defoliants developed from agricultural herbicides (Monsanto's 'Agent Orange'), the mutagenic effects of which on the human population still persist nearly half a century after the end of the war'. This report estimated that 70 million litres of herbicide were sprayed between 1961 and 1971, contaminating 40 per cent of Vietnam's arable land, while the country also lost 23 per cent of its forest cover (Bonneuil & Fressoz, February 18, 2016). Despite the large-scale human killing, destruction of infrastructure, ruination of the ecosystem and increasing

deglorification of war by the peace scholars in particular, wars haven't ceased to occur after the First World War, Second World War, Korean War, Vietnam War and other wars that followed. It has kept on returning and causing havoc and horror.

To firmly resist the initiation of war by any state or armed groups on any pretext and denouncing the idea of militarily solving any conflict within the state or across the borders and beyond, the consequences of war for the humans, infrastructures and natural habitats need to be highlighted all the time and the painful stories of victims of wars - the humans, infrastructures, natural habitats including trees and forests - told and retold in the class rooms, on television channels and through social media. In addition, the peaceful role of the trees in humans' life and its relevance and importance in the global struggle for peace need to be projected.

Trees and Peace

Throughout history, trees have been treated as humans have been treated. On the one hand, all religions, cultures and societies regard human life inherently valuable, and on the other, the humans are massacred in large numbers in wars and violence. Similarly, the trees are revered but brutally ruined and destroyed in wars and violence. In some religions and cultures, the reverence is so deep and so profound that the trees are worshipped. For instance, in the Indian-origin religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, the groves of five trees - Banyan, Peepal, Amla, Ashoka and Bell - are treated as especially significant, and in animist beliefs, trees are seen as living beings with a life force. By and large, the trees are looked at with gratitude in all societies for the benefits they provide selflessly. An idea of the silent but peaceful and impactful role the trees play in our life and thinking and daily life can be gauged by referring to tree-related proverbs and inspirational quotes in circulation in different societies. A number of them carry profound meaning and wisdom and inspiration, and hint at the peace role of the trees. Some proverbs and quotes taken randomly from different online sites include: 'The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn'(Ralph Waldo Emerson); 'He who plants a tree, plants a hope'(Lucy Larcom); 'Like a tree, be grounded, yet reach for the sky'(Wangari Maathai); 'A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit'(Greek Proverb); 'The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best is now (Chinese Proverb); 'Trees are like the veins of our planet, carrying the life blood of the air, water and wildlife around' (Julia Hill); 'Until you dig a hole, you plant a tree, you water it and make it survive, you haven't done a thing. You are just talking' (Wangari Maathai); 'It will never rain roses: when we want to have more roses we must plant

more trees' (George Eliot); ' You can't have the fruits without the roots' (Stephen Covey); ' A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees' (William Blake); ' Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower' (Albert Camus); ' Hope is the tree that holds the world' (Pliny); ' A tree never hits an automobile except in self – defense' (Woody Allen); and Khalil Jibran's immortal quote – ' Trees are poems that the earth writes upon sky'.

One may go on quoting hundreds of proverbs and quotes to show the closeness of relations between the humans and trees. Likewise one may refer to a number of poems, stories, paintings and movies revolving around trees. However, what is intriguing is the fact that the peacefulness and peaceful role of trees are not highlighted as powerfully as they deserve. Nor is a sort of collective anger unleashed against the annihilation and ruination of trees in wars and violence. It is really intriguing because the peaceful character and peace role of trees is significant enough. For instance, a tree provides shelter to all. It is not bothered about the nationality, religion, profession, social, economic and political status, and the gender of those who rest under its shades. Neither is it racist nor a follower of a particular political thought. It embraces people of all races, languages, cultures and political thought. Again, a tree is never revengeful. It provides fruits to all, even to those who throw stones at it. The remarkable peacefulness of the trees can be further highlighted by referring to the twin but totally opposed concepts of 'net' and 'nest'.

There is a world of difference in the meaning and function of net and nest. Net is a trap laid by power. It is the weapon of the schemer, targeter, chaser, hunter, cager, and destroyer of ideas, dreams and freedoms. Nest, on the other hand, is a cradle, a sanctuary, a kingdom of peace, security and happiness, where especially the mother bird takes care of the little ones, feeds them, sings the songs of love and joy into their ears, tells them the stories of life and its struggles, and cautions them against the lurking dangers and about those hiding in the dark and moving their colorful nets to attract the potential victims, invite them, catch hold of them and imprison them. In due course, the little ones learn how to fly and then they fly one day into the vastness of the blue sky and finally they look for a nest where they could produce little birds and feed them and play with them without any fear (Mehdi, 2000: 83-84). It is the trees who provide heaven to the birds without any discrimination, and they don't charge any fee for their marvelous services. They try to hide the birds and especially the little ones from snakes snaking in from different directions, from the wild animals and from the hunters with their nets. The trees ensure that the nests within their bosom serve as safe heavens to the birds and their children and shield them from the scorching sun, heavy rain, strong winds and floods and other dangers. As a matter of fact, a kingdom of peace is established in every nest hosted by the trees. These life – giving and life – saving trees are charred

into ashes when war arrives and spreads its wings. Then no loud voices are raised, no protest marches organized, and no movement is launched to protect the trees from war and violence and punish the warriors who destroy these trees.

While all the trees are inherently peace trees, some possess significant historical importance. Among these, the peepal (*Ficus religiosa* or Banyan) tree, popularly known as the Bodhi Tree or wisdom tree stands out as a highly revered peace tree in the world. It is said that Lord Buddha sat mediating under the tree for seven weeks without food or water, and after attaining enlightenment he ‘spent seven days standing in front of the tree gazing at it with gratitude’ (Hussain, September, 2019). Originating from here and spreading out in different parts of India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, China and beyond, Buddhism influenced the politics, cultures and religious thoughts as a theology of liberation and peace. That’s why this tree is also known as Mahabodhi tree or the tree of great awakening. The Mahabodhi tree, one may add here, refers to an existing tree growing at the Mahabodhi Temple Complex in Bodh Gaya in the Indian state of Bihar, and it is believed to be a direct descendent of the original tree. This site is said to be the most important of the four main Buddhist pilgrim sites in the world. Through Buddhist teachings, Buddhist temples and also through the Buddhist and other pilgrims visiting the Mahabodhi Tree and Mahabodhi Temple Complex, Buddha’s message of tolerance and peace were passed on to the succeeding generations for centuries and the messages continue to be passed on.

How has the Mahabodhi Tree survived for such a long time when, according to legend, the original tree was slaughtered three times : first time around 230 BC, when Tissarakkhah, the second wife of King Ashoka – the greatest peace king of India and the world – destroyed the tree with poisonous medu or mandu thorns out of jealousy; the second time in the second century BC when King Pushyamitra Sunga, a violent anti-Buddhism ruler, ordered for the annihilation of the tree; and the third time in 600 CE when King Shashanka ordered for its destruction. By this time Buddhism was already in decline. It mainly survived outside India – in Tibet, China, Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Far East and Japan (ibid). According to another historical account, the original tree was not preserved in Bodh Gaya only, but the devotees of Buddhism carried the branches of the original tree to far off places and planted them on various locations. It is said that Sanghmitra, the daughter of King Ashoka, travelled with a branch from the original Bodhi tree to Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, where it is still flourishing as an imposing tree and passing on the Buddhist message of peace and tolerance to the succeeding generations (Mir, December 8, 2021). One may add here that along with the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya and the Bodhi tree in Sri Lanka, the Bodhi trees in different parts

of the world are spreading the message of peace and paving the way for peace promotion and peacebuilding.

Peace Trees and Peace Initiatives

Though rarely noted and expressed, the trees have always been with the humans in their quest for freedom and passion to resist control of any kind by *anyone* and to ensure that free will and free spirit will always be very important for the humans. The trees have always been around to encourage the humans to exercise their free will, whatever the cost be and how threatening the circumstances be. The story of such an amazing nature of relationship has a long history. As religious narratives suggest, when Adam and Eve were created and sent to the Garden of Eden, trees were also created to let them enjoy the fruits of the trees, rest under their shades and dance around them. However, Adam and Eve were instructed never to go near the Tree of Knowledge and Evil and eat its fruits, but the curiosity held better of them. They went near the forbidden tree, ate the forbidden fruits and both were expelled from the Garden of Eden. It was a sort of forced migration and they migrated to the planet earth. Soon after, the trees also migrated and the humans and the trees have been living together since then.

Let it be added here that the trees and forests have been serving for a very long time as sanctuaries for the visionaries, activists, rebels, writers, political leaders and workers, in short for anyone who managed to escape the reach of the hunters, the loyal servants of tyrannical regimes and terrorizing political systems. Again, the trees and forests often converted themselves into battlegrounds during the colonizing times, and in post-colonial Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, in different Latin American countries and in many other places against the usurpers and fully sided with the victims of colonialism, apartheid and foreign military interventions. Here one may refer to the big, strong and expansive trees of Dhaka University in Bangladesh. During the Pakistan days from 1947 to 1971, the political meetings of the young students used to be held under these trees. Fiery political speeches were delivered under their shades and political movements were launched from there. When the Pakistan's military regime took military action against the Bengali masses from March to December 1971, who were demanding their political and economic rights, the trees of the University were reportedly destroyed. However, the trees had their strong roots and they grew up once in due course, and new movements for political and social change flourished under the motherly shades of these trees (Ahmed, 2021).

Therefore, it would be unfair to say that the trees are not doing anything for peace and change. However, it won't be unfair to say that neither the potentials and

competence of the trees for peace promotion and peacebuilding nor the peace initiatives of the recent times woven around peace trees have been highlighted adequately. Take, for example, the Hiroshima peace trees initiative. When the US dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, it destroyed a large part of the city and turned a large number of trees into charred bodies. However, about 160 trees within a 2 – kilometer radius of the hypocenter survived. These trees have continued to grow, some even regenerating after being scorched about eighty years ago. They stand tall and proud as a symbol of Hiroshima's resilience. True that the Peace Memorial Park of Hiroshima features many A - Bomb survivor trees and keeps the visitors informed about the violence done to them, but most of the people living outside Japan are not resourceful enough and privileged enough to visit the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and the Memorial Park. To some of them, Hiroshima is reaching out through its trees that survived the atomic bombing. Hiroshima has been sending seeds of survivor trees to different parts of the world for the plantation of Hiroshima trees. Stories about the destroyed city of Hiroshima in 1945 and its reemergence as a resilient and hustling and bustling city are therefore reaching far flung locations. The Mayors for Peace organization, which works closely with the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is actively involved in the campaign to send the seeds and seedlings to other countries. According to a report, the seeds and seedlings have been distributed to 88 cities (Oxford Botanic Garden & Arboretum , September 1, 2023). In other words, Hiroshima is already growing in 88 cities of the world.

Here one may refer to another initiative to build peace through tree plantation in troubled areas. To what extent and how decisively this initiative has been successful in containing and controlling protracted tribal war and tribal culture of warriorism through tree plantation in the affected areas of Kalinga in the Philippines is not easy to ascertain. A number of factors and forces have been active in transforming the blood – thirsty and revenge – thirsty tribal region of Kalinga, and the changing times are also impacting the traditional tribal thinking and ways of dealing with the conflicts.

The people of Kalinga – the Kalingas – are one of the major ethno – linguistic groups in the Philippines and they are composed of 48 indigenous tribes. Kalinga has a history of headhunting and tribal war. The name Kalinga means headhunter, fighter or enemy in the *Ibanag* and *Itawes* dialects. A report of a leading resource institution of the Philippines published online in 2009 says: 'Tribal Warfare is a fact of life for the indigenous peoples. And it takes just a perceived wrongdoing to spark one. The bond among tribesmen is as strong as blood relations that attacking one member incurs the ire of the whole tribe. A tribe would also rather go to war than surrender a suspected criminal among their ranks. And when

the tribes are on war footing, movement becomes restricted, lives and livelihoods are disrupted and lost, and everyone suffers' (Galing Pook).

In order to ensure that 'the enemies' do not hide or disappear in the wilderness of weeds, bushes and trees at the top and their movements could be seen even from a distance, the mountain tops were deliberately kept clear and open by cutting the trees and keeping the mountain tops bald. Such an arrangement remained in place for fifty years or so. However, with the growing awareness of changing times, growing realization that the economic, political, social, and cultural costs of violent tribal and traditional practices of settling disputes, and active involvement of the Christian missionaries in the region and beyond to promote trust and peace among the warring tribes opened doors for new and innovative thinking and solutions. One of the initiatives was to persuade the tribes to agree for massive tree plantation through joint participation. In other words, trees have been summoned to play an important role in diminishing an age old culture of violence and tribal warfare.

To be fair, tree plantation can be viewed as a peacebuilding activity in a variety of ways. To begin with, it may be seen to be capable of diminishing environmental hazards and reducing the chances of eruption of environment-ignited conflicts between and within the states. Again, the trees can promote a win-win situation for all the stake holders and lead to blossoming of peace and co-operation among the neighboring countries in particular. In this context, the forest peacebuilding model presented by Claire Williams deserves attention. In a paper published in 2024, the author puts forward strong arguments in favor of local peacebuilding mechanism – shared forest cooperatives(SFC) – and claims that such a peace action plan may play an important role in the resource poor and conflict prone fragile states in Global South (Williams, July 2024). It is, indeed, heartening to note that a number of initiatives and plans for action presented by concerned peace and climate change educators and scholars have begun to influence the debate on war, violence and trees.

Conclusion

While the importance of growing more trees to tackle with environmental hazards and bigger climate change challenges is being accepted worldwide and a variety of roadmaps are being offered for the journey ahead, important studies and focused discourses on the devastating consequences of wars and violence for the trees are very slow to emerge. Most of the studies, some of them excellent studies on the effects of war, focus on casualties, destruction of infrastructures and to a lesser

extent on the affected ecosystems. However, not many offer comprehensive accounts of what war does to the trees.

Recently a number of remarkable studies were produced under the supervision and guidance of Professor Liu Cheng, holder of UNESCO Chair at Nanjing University and Director of the Institute of Peace Studies there. These well researched works on the destruction of Nanjing in China, Dresden in Germany, Coventry in UK, Warsaw in Poland, and Hiroshima in Japan due to war offer comprehensive accounts of destruction suffered by these cities. These studies also present a comprehensive account of the rise of these cities out of the ashes to blossom as peace cities (Damek, 2022; Harrowell, 2022; Spiegel, 2022; Shuang, 2022; and Deting, 2022). Among these works, the one on Hiroshima refers to the ruination of trees and their rise, once again, demonstrating that life is more powerful than death (Deting, 2024: 107-108).

However, even well-researched and well – documented studies on the destruction of Hiroshima and on the pangs of pains of atomic survivors rarely refer to the ruination of Hiroshima trees. Like *The Fate of the Earth* (Schell, 1982: 37), several other works focus on the life stories of *Hibakushas* and not on *Hibako Trees* or Atomic survivor trees of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Likewise, the naked picture of the young girl, Kim Phuc running on the road in pain, taken on June 8, 1972, is doubtless among the most indelible images from the Vietnam war. However, the pictures of the charred trees in wars and especially the trees choked and burnt to death soon after the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were never provided the opportunity to exercise the impact of an indelible image of atomic bombing (Chong, 2001).

Furthermore and by and large, the numerous peace movements at local(national), regional and global levels usually focus on war, violence, nuclear weapon proliferation, injustice, dictatorship, poverty, inequality and slaveries of all kinds, but they usually focus on the humans as victims of wars and violence and not on trees. There is therefore a need to launch a robust international movement for the life and security of the trees in war times and integrate this movement with the movement for peace everywhere.

Finally, it's time to strongly protest against the display of weapons and the march of soldiers with their shining weapons while celebrating national days. Such a kind of celebration militarizes the minds, sows the seeds of violence and justifies wars and violence in the name of national honor, national interest and national security. Perhaps the time has arrived when the marches during such celebrations should be joined by the students and teachers, artists, painters, writers and poets, medical doctors and paramedical staff, justices, lawyers and journalists, women and children, farmers and laborers, police officials (especially the low ranking

police officials), representatives of small businesses and people carrying the replicas of trees and also branches of the trees. If the state insists on celebrating the national days by projecting its military power only, then a parallel procession of the citizens should be organized with the participation of those belonging to the neglected sections of the society, including the victims of wars and violence, and the peace potentials and peace role of the trees should be highlighted.

Perhaps such a movement can be spearheaded by an international organization like the Centre for Global Nonkilling based in Honolulu, Hawaii. It was established under the leadership of Glenn D Paige, a Professor of Political Science at the University of Hawaii in Manoa and author of a ground – breaking study *Nonkilling Global Political Science*(2002). The mission of the Centre is to promote the idea of a killing- free world by globally advancing nonkilling knowledge and skills. If a prominent space is accorded to the non – killing of the trees in their campaigns for a non – killing world, this organization can powerfully involve in the campaign for the right of the trees to life, security and growth. At the end of the day, such an initiative can help peace grow.

Let it be noted that peace grows like a tree and it would grow faster if the struggle for peace carries the peace trees with itself.

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