

Agricultural Extension in South Asia

My Head for a Tree: The Extraordinary Story of the Bishnoi, the World's First Eco-Warriors

Martin Goodman (2025)

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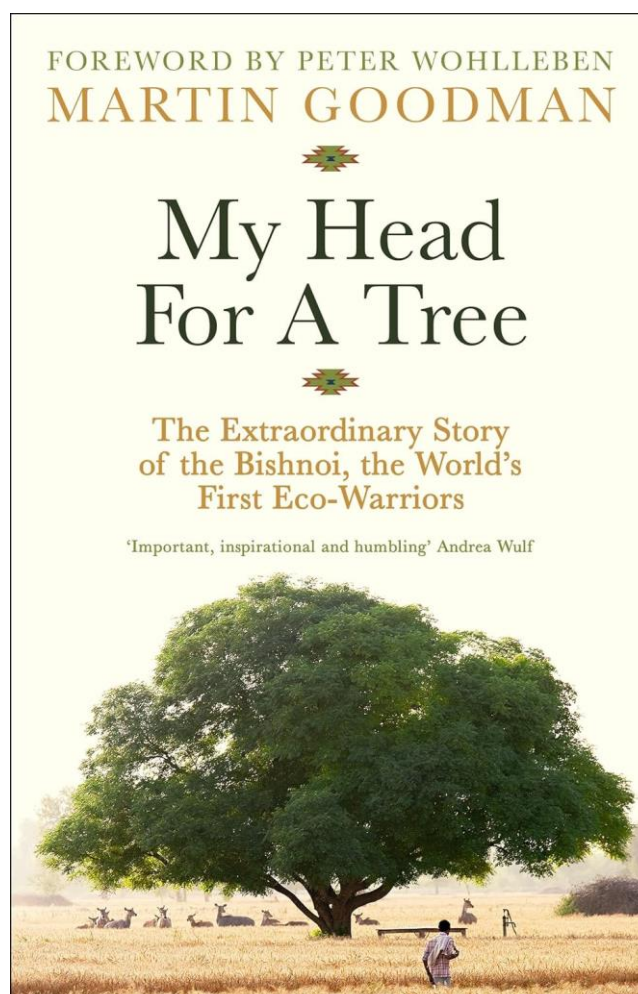
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Martin Goodman's *My Head for a Tree* offers an insightful and layered account of the Bishnoi community of Rajasthan, often referred to as the world's first eco-warriors. What makes this book stand out is not just its subject but the gentle persistence with which it compels readers to consider a world where environmental care is not an external choice but a lived cultural value. For those approaching it through an anthropological lens, particularly those attentive to gender, this book is as much about worldview and belonging as it is about activism and nature.

Goodman, with the clarity of an experienced journalist, guides us through the arid yet vibrant landscapes of western India, where the *khejri* tree is not merely a source of shade but also food, fodder, fuel, and deep symbolic meaning. The Bishnois' reverence for the tree is not just performative, it's practical, spiritual, and mostly historical. Among the Bishnois, trees are cared for like kin, wildlife is nurtured, and the environment is not seen as something separate to be controlled but as an extension of the self, something that must be protected as naturally as one would protect family. This relational ethic is rooted in the 16th-century teachings of Guru *Jambhoji*, whose 29 tenets (*or shabads*) continue to guide the everyday lives of Bishnois.

This book blends oral history, personal stories, and community memoirs with Goodman's journalistic interviews, offering a rich documentation of the Bishnois for a wider English-speaking global audience. It explores multiple



understandings of what *Bishnoism* is. Some see it as a religion distinct from mainstream Hinduism, others as a sect or cultural identity, while for many, it is a way of life that binds people to land, ethics, and one another. Goodman doesn't settle on one definition and instead lets the ambiguity speak for itself. This understanding and the refusal to reduce identity to a single definition is especially important in a time when ecological, religious, and cultural identities are increasingly under contestation.

Having experienced the desert landscape firsthand, the book resonated deeply with me. It brought to life the elements like that of *khejri tree* and the *chinkara*, revealing the long history and deep meaning embedded within them. The book made the unseen visible, as it intended to, by bringing into focus the Bishnoi youth who lost their lives defending antelopes, the elderly men who planted thousands of trees across the desert in solitude, the quiet legal battles waged against powerful interests, and the acts of martyrdom by Bishnoi men and women to protect their forests and natural surroundings. Framed within the context that Goodman offers, these stories carry strength and emotional depth that still pulse through the community even today.

Yet, while the narrative is rich, it isn't without its silences. The treatment of gender, for instance, felt underexplored. There is mention of women's roles, such as the widely circulated image of a Bishnoi woman breastfeeding an orphaned chinkara, of women participating in pilgrimage and rituals, and of course, the story of Amrita Devi's sacrifice, but these are largely framed within nurturing and maternal tropes. What remains insufficiently explored is how these ideals coexist with everyday patriarchy. While Jambhoji's 29 *shabads* condemn any form of dominance and discrimination and might have been ahead of their time, in practice, decisions around women's mobility, marriage, and agency continue to be male dominated even today. The gap between philosophy and practice is evident, yet the book rarely acknowledges it. This reminded me of the enduring [nature-culture binary](#) that Sherry Ortner (1972) wrote about, which seems to echo across the book.

There's also a romanticization of tradition, sacrifice, and the ecological heroism of the community to some extent. While the book touches upon the tensions between modernity, tradition, culture, and development, it sometimes overlooks the complexities of these transitions. For example, while environmental advocacy among Bishnois is framed as a spiritual act and a way of life, the broader strategic use of this identity for demanding recognition, quotas, or legal rights is left slightly outside the frame. These are not contradictions per se but coexisting realities that deserve a more critical gaze.

What's also intriguing is how *Bishnoism* is being redefined across spaces and generations. As young Bishnois migrate to cities, take up legal studies, and engage with state institutions, their connection to Jambhoji's teachings remains but in a transformed manner. Goodman captures this evolution sensitively, especially in how he portrays new forms of ecological resistance emerging through legal battles, challenging environmental assessments, and proposals to transplant trees using modern tools and technologies that allow development to proceed without complete ecological loss. It shows that the Bishnoi tradition is gradually adapting and not disappearing.

The final sections of the book, however, veer slightly into generalizations where actions by non-Bishnois across other parts of India are swept under the same narrative to build a larger movement. While the intention to expand the moral universe is clear, it falls into the trap of reducing diverse environmental values to one cultural label. As mentioned, calling something “Bishnoi” can, at times, become like calling something “Zen”, risking a loss of its specific context and meaning.

With all its details and nuances, *My Head for a Tree* is a great read. It gives due recognition to a community whose lesser-known efforts have shaped major conservation work in India. It shows how ethics are lived out over generations, not just years. And it invites readers, especially with an interest in sustainability, development, conservation, or gender, to reflect on how cultural worldviews influence our collective futures.

As Goodman reminds us, the Bishnois have long been responding to what the world is only now recognizing as a global climate crisis. Their *guru* foresaw these challenges centuries ago, and the community has been actively working to address them ever since. Their response has been local, lived, and multifaceted, shaped by both contradictions and resilience. The lesson here is not to idealize the Bishnois but to listen, reflect, and rethink our relationships with the land, with life, and with one another.

Aayushi Malhotra



Aayushi Malhotra is an Assistant Scientist at the International Rice Research Institute, New Delhi, India. She holds an interdisciplinary PhD in the field of Environmental Anthropology. She can be contacted at a.malhotra@cgiar.org

**AESA Secretariat: Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP)
Road No 10, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India**

www.aesanetwork.org

Email: aesanetwork@gmail.com