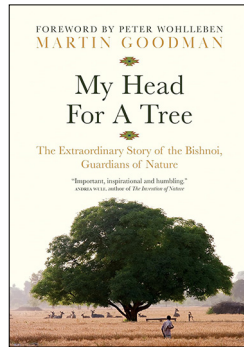


My Head for a Tree: the Extraordinary Story of the Bishnoi, Guardians of Nature

By Martin Goodman. Preface by Ram Niwas Bishnoi Budhnagar. Foreword by Peter Wohlleben. 2025. Greystone Books. 272 pages, 36.95 CAD, Hardcover. Also available as an E-book.

“The story of Bishnoi is one of those ‘greatest stories never told’” (p. 10). Martin Goodman does a good job telling the story of this Hindu community based in parts of India that values the lives of trees and other wildlife. There are those of us who recycle, plant pollinator gardens, or ‘go solar’ just to help the environment; the followers of Bishnoi go much farther, sacrificing themselves instead of allowing a live tree to be cut down.



Goodman’s book about the Bishnoi isn’t a difficult read, but for me, it didn’t flow eloquently. My notes taken during the reading of this book include words like “stiff” and “stumbling”. This was unexpected from an award-winning author. However, the story is so valuable that the at times unpolished text shouldn’t be a deterrent to reading this book.

Goodman first describes the beginning of the Bishnoi by relating the life story of Jambhoji (1451–1536),

who founded the practice in 1485. The basic tenet of the Bishnoi is that “people had to stop living in conflict with their environment...they had to live in harmony with the natural world” (p. 88). (And over 500 years later, we’re still working on this.) Subsequent chapters follow the evolution of the Bishnoi, describing their struggles in modern terms.

Goodman writes about Bishnoi success stories, such as the rearing of endangered wildlife like Indian Bustard. He also writes of their continuing challenges, including feral dogs that are the leading cause of death of Chinkara, a small, desert-dwelling antelope. The Bishnoi also patrol for poachers and are responsible for bringing many to trial.

The Appendix lists and describes the 29 rules that govern the lives of the Bishnoi, which are similar to the Ten Commandments of the Abrahamic religions. It is stressed that one cannot pick and choose among the rules, it is an all-or-nothing lifestyle.

“The Bishnoi lead by example. We would do well to follow as best we can” (p. 11).

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