



Tradition of Sacred Groves in India – A Review

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ABSTRACT

Sacred groves are the fine example of in-situ conservation. Sacred groves are forest fragments, size varying between 0.5 -500 hectare, (Some of the sacred groves are more than 500 hectare in size) which are protected by religious communities, and have a significant religious connotation for the protecting community. During shifting cultivation a part of the forest is left undisturbed. The sacredness, religious beliefs and taboos play a significant role in promoting sustainable utilization and conservation of flora and fauna of the region. Here all the species found in the area are protected and these areas called as sacred groves. The sacred groves have been preserved over generations in India. Rare, Endangered, Threatened and Endemic species are often concentrated in sacred groves. Hunting and logging are usually prohibited in sacred groves. Developmental activities are also restricted within these patches. Sacred groves are mostly associated with temples/monasteries / shrines or with cremation grounds. Sacred groves occur in many parts of India, particularly where the indigenous communities live. Sacred Groves are also culturally important; various cultural and religious festivals are often arranged by local people within these patches. Sacred groves contain various ecosystems, various food chains and food webs. Sacred groves are scattered all over the country, and are referred to by different names in different parts of India.

KEYWORDS : Sacred groves, conservation, religious, communities, taboos, sacredness, indigenous, ecosystems.

INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

Sacred groves are, Mini-forests with rich diversity, Storehouses of rare and endangered plants, Gene-pool gardens for ex-situ conservation, Centers of traditional socio-cultural and eco-folklore. Sacred groves are the fine example of in-situ conservation. Around 15000 sacred groves have been reported from different parts of India. Hunting and logging are usually prohibited in sacred groves. Developmental activities are also restricted within these patches. Sacred groves are mostly associated with temples/monasteries / shrines or with cremation grounds. Sacred groves occur in many parts of India, particularly where the indigenous communities live. Sacred Groves are also culturally important; various cultural and religious festivals are often arranged by local people within these patches. Sacred groves contain various ecosystems and various food chains and food webs are present in sacred Groves. Sacred groves are not only the sacred ecosystems functioning as a rich repository of nature's unique biodiversity, but also a product of the socio-ecological philosophy our fore-fathers have been cherishing since olden days. Sacred groves do not just help conserve valuable biodiversity, soil and water, but are also critical in regulating weather and climate. Many valuable medicinal plants and wild relatives of cultivated species are present in the groves which may have definite role to play in the future programmes. Sacred groves have well developed forest ecosystems and high degrees of species richness and a rich biodiversity in general. Sacred groves are often the last refuge for endemic and endangered plant and animal species.^{1, 2, 3}

Sacred groves also help in soil and water conservation, besides preserving biodiversity. The ponds and streams adjoining the groves are perennial water sources, and are often the only source for many of the animals and birds that make them their habitat, especially during summer. Sacred groves are extremely rich in floral and faunal elements. The origin of the groves is likely to have followed the introduction of agriculture. It is often believed that during shifting cultivation a part of the forest is left undisturbed. Here all the species found in the area are protected. These areas might have developed as sacred groves.¹ Sacred Groves often protect watersheds and water sources. Groves are the result of the reasoned assertion rather than the instinctive behavior of the communities. The taboos, rituals and religious beliefs associated with the groves, supported by mystic folklore, have been the prime motivating factors for preserving the sacred groves.

Types of sacred groves

1. Temple Groves – A grove is created around the temple.
2. Traditional Sacred Grove – The place where the village deity resides, and represented by an elementary symbol.
3. Burial Groves – A grove is created around the cremation grounds.^{4, 5}

2. TRADITION OF SACRED GROVE IN INDIA

Sacred Grove – A fine example of community based nature conservation without any external support. Sacredgroves are age-old traditional nature conservation practices adopted by the communities all over the world. The tradition of protecting Peepal, Gular and Bargad trees is found in many states of India. People do not harm sacred groves mainly because of socio-religious traditions and fear of the deity, believing that who soever harms sacred grove may be harmed by the presiding deity. Resources that are traditionally obtained from flora and fauna located in sacred groves include fodder, fruits, dry fallen wood, seeds, soil fertilizer and ayurvedic and general medicines.

The sacred groves have been preserved over generations in India. The concept of sacred groves in India has its roots in antiquity, even before the Vedic age, the Vedas representing the only recorded remains of the thoughts of the ancient Aryans who migrated into this sub-continent. In their migration from the steppes of the Central Asia through Balkh in Khorasan to the Indian sub-continent, the Vedic people of pre-historic times assimilated new environmental values incorporating into their value system, the concept of the "sacred grove" from the original inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent.

There is vast diversity among India's sacred groves. Some contain only a few trees, while others are hundreds of acres in size. Sometimes groves overlap with larger forested areas, while others exist as islands in open plains or desert. Even their names vary from region to region. Most sacred groves in India are associated with the almost 40,000 endogamous groups within the Hindu caste system and other major religions such as Buddhism and Islam, along with other religious communities and traditional tribal groups. In many groves, villagers perform annual rituals and ceremonies to appease the presiding deity and ensure the well-being of the community. It is also common for people to make individual offerings.

Sacred groves are dedicated by local communities to their deities. Such a grove may consist of a multi-species, multi-tier primary forest or a cluster of trees, depending on the history of the vegetation. These groves were protected by local communities, usually through customary taboos and sanctions with cultural and ecological implications. Thus, sacred groves are segments of landscape containing vegetation and other forms of life and geographical features that are delimited and protected by human societies to keep them in a relatively undisturbed state. The sacred groves were reported earlier from the Himalayas, North-east India, highlands of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Distributed throughout India, the current level of protection and conservation of sacred groves is hampered by erosion in traditional, religious beliefs and cultural values, but these traditional methods of social fencing of these ecosystem types as conservation patches are being rediscovered at present by the environmentally conscious communities. The total area of sacred groves in India would be about 33,000 ha which comes to 0.01 percent of the total area of the country. But the actual area of the 4,415 sacred groves reported so far cover more than 42,000 ha. Hence, it may not be possible to come up with a reasonable estimate based on the present reports.

Sacred groves help to define the cultural identity of the communities that revere and protect them. Sacred groves are also closely linked to the politics and economies of their communities, and their legal status and management vary among regions and individual villages. Some groves are associated with and managed by separate caste groups within a community, some by a village as a whole, and some by neighboring districts within a larger geographical area. India is one of the world's top 12 mega diversity countries with rich variety of biological community. Sacred groves are one of the first instances of traditional conservation. These protected forest patches dedicated to gods and goddesses, survived the axe of development because of the conservation ethics coupled with taboos and traditions. Sacred groves are a very ancient and widespread phenomenon in the old world cultures. References about sacred groves have been made in Greek and Sanskrit classics. The traditional Hindu society recognizes individual species as objects of worship, based on accumulated empirical knowledge and their identified value for one reason or the other.^{1,2,6,7}

2.1 SACRED GROVES IN DIFFERENT STATES OF INDIA

Sacred groves are scattered all over the country, and are referred to by different names in different parts of India. Around 14,000 sacred groves have been reported from all over India. In India, the sacred groves were reported earlier from the Himalayas, North-east India, highlands of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The current level of protection and conservation of sacred groves is hampered by erosion in traditional and cultural values, but these traditional methods of social fencing of these ecosystem types as conservation patches are being rediscovered at present by the environmentally conscious communities.^{1,2,6,7}

2.1.1 SACRED GROVES OF MEGHALAYA

The total number sacred grove in Meghalaya is 79 and locally called as Law kyntang, Law Lyngdhoh. The people of Meghalaya believe that the sacred groves are the abode of deities. It bestows the welfare of people, their cattle & land, and keeps the evil spirits away. Those who do not obey the traditional norms of these groves may have to face the wrath of the deity. Local people believe that the Sylvan deities would be offended if trees are cut and twigs, flowers, fruits, etc. are plucked. These groves are considered as one of the most species-rich areas for plants, birds and mammals. Sacred groves of Meghalaya revealed that at least 514 species representing 340 genera and 131 families are present in these sacred forests.⁸

2.1.2 SACRED GROVES OF SIKKIM

Sacred groves in Sikkim are attached to Buddhist monasteries called Gumpa forest and are managed by lamas. Total number of groves in Sikkim is 56 spread over 4 districts. The highlands of Demojong below the Khangchendzonga peak are the most sacred site for the Sikkim's Buddhist. Any human activity here is believed to spell disaster for the

region.⁹

2.1.3 SACRED GROVES OF ASSAM

There are about 40 sacred groves in Assam and locally called as Than and Madaico. The size of Madaico is generally not more than an acre. Groves are also found in the plains of Brahmaputra in Assam. The Vaishnav monasteries like Shankaradevamaths distributed all over the state also have sacred groves.¹⁰

2.1.4 SACRED GROVES OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Arunachal Pradesh has sacred groves attached to Buddhist monasteries called as Gumpa forest areas which are managed by lamas. 58 groves are reported from the state.

2.1.5 SACRED GROVES OF MANIPUR

There are 365 sacred groves in Manipur. Out of the 166 sacred groves identified in the four valley districts of Manipur, only a few are well preserved (11%), while most are partly threatened (58%) and others are threatened (31%) due to various anthropogenic pressures such as developmental activities, urbanization and population explosion. There are also forest belts protected as sacred around the habitations called as Gamkhap. Gangtribal's also having small reserves of bamboo called Mauhak. Extraction of bamboo shoots from mauhakis totally prohibited.

2.2.6 SACRED GROVES OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR

Sacred groves are present all over Jammu and Kashmir, managed by religious bodies or management committees. Area ranges from 0.4 to 1374 acres. 150 groves have been reported from Jammu and Kashmir. Locally known as Banis. In larger groves normal forestry operations are carried out and the income goes to shrine. The Shankaracharya sacred grove is a reserve forest being maintained for aesthetic and recreational purposes. Small groves are highly protected and any removal is a taboo.¹¹

2.1.7 SACRED GROVES OF HIMACHAL PRADESH

There are a number of sacred groves attached to various local deities in Himachal Pradesh, about 5,000 sacred groves are present in Himachal Pradesh. The timber obtained from these groves is utilized for repair and maintenance of temples only. Villagers who pass through the grove dust their clothes to make sure they do not carry anything belonging to the grove. Due to strict protection and cultural beliefs, many groves harbor climax vegetation.⁴

2.1.8 SACRED GROVES OF RAJASTHAN

There are around 1100 (Only 9 sacred groves are in documented form) major Oran's spread out in an area of more than 1,00,000 hectares in Rajasthan providing livelihood to the rural population. Sacred groves are known under various names in Rajasthan as Deora, Malvan, Deorai, RakhatBani, Oran, etc. Rajasthan provided interesting insights on tribal traditions of maintaining sacred groves. People of Rajasthan worship Bheruji, Bawsi and Mataji. KhanpaBheruji, KukawasBheruji, BadiRoopan Mata etc. in sacred groves.

2.1.9 SACRED GROVES OF MADHYA PRADESH

Around 21 Sacred Groves are present in Madhya Pradesh and they conserve a large number of plants are commonly known as Deogudi / Sarnas. They believe that if the plants are not maintained properly or destroyed, natural calamity will ruin their clan. Sarnashave, of late, been opened up for extraction of non-timber forest produce as the other forests nearby have been denuded.

2.1.10 SACRED GROVES OF JHARKHAND

A number (21) of sacred groves are commonly known as Saran in Jharkhand. These groves are usually small forest patches not more than an acre. In the Chhotanagpur area there are various types of Saranlike SarhulSarana where a festival is celebrated when sal trees start flowering.¹²

2.1.11 Sacred Groves of Maharashtra

More than 400 sacred groves (Mauhak, Gamkhap) covering an area of 35710 ha have been reported with 790 species of plants belonging to 352 genera. Felling of timber and killing of animal in sacred groves is a taboo in Maharashtra. However, the local community can use twigs, leaf litter, fruits and herbs that grow in them. The sacred groves are the only piece of forest in their area that is kept untouched. The top

soil from the groves is used as manure to cultivate millets and sesame.¹³

2.2.12 SACRED GROVES OF WEST BENGAL

Sacred Groves in West Bengal generally called Garamthan, Harithan and Jahira. Over 670 groves are reported from West Bengal. Most of these groves are very small, generally less than an acre. No biomass is harvested from them. Bamboo groves are found in Jalpaiguri & Coochbihar districts.¹⁴

2.1.13 SACRED GROVES OF ANDHRA PRADESH

The state of Andhra Pradesh has 800 sacred groves enumerated so far, locally known as Pavithra-vanalu, 100 of these groves are rich in biodiversity. Nellore district occupies third place in having highest number of sacred groves (88) after Kurnool district (106) and Chittoor district (102). Local communities afford better protection and management to sacred groves. Biodiversity of Sacred groves is preserved in mostly undisturbed condition probably due to certain taboos and religious beliefs.¹⁵

2.1.14 SACRED GROVES OF GOA

In Goa, Sacred Groves are known by various names such as Devrai, Devranor Dewart. There was a time when most of the villages had their sacred groves. Sacred Groves which are repositories of plant and animal wealth that have been conserved over the years by the locals. Sacred groves are dedicated to forest gods and other local deities and are worshipped by the local peoples. They have a sacred cow, sacred goat, sacred banyan tree, sacred hill, sacred stone, sacred ponds and also sacred groves.^{16, 17}

2.1.15 SACRED GROVES OF KARNATAKA

According to the records of the forest department about 1214 Devarakadusspread over an area about 6299 acres. The groves in Karnataka broadly fall under two categories. The smaller groves which are entirely protected- no tree felling or other biomass extraction are allowed. On the other hand, larger groves function as resource forests, offering both livelihood sustenance and ecological security. The people of the village may gather fallen deadwood, non-wood produce.

2.1.16 SACRED GROVES OF TAMIL NADU

Around 503 groves have been reported from Tamil Nadu and locally known as KovilKadu. Under Sthalavriksha concept, individual trees are considered sacred and worshiped all over the state. Some are owned and managed by the village communities under hereditary trusteeship. Sacred groves associated with large Hindu temples are managed by local trustees of the temple governing board under the supervision of State-run institutions.¹⁸

2.1.17 SACRED GROVES OF KERALA

Sacred groves of Kerala are generally referred askavu. Total number of groves reported is around 2000. Groves can be seen in combination with ponds or water bodies also. 761 important sacred groves were reported from Kerala with over 722 plant species belonging to 474 genera and 217 families. The biodiversity potential of these groves was found to be very good when compared to well protect evergreen forests of south India.¹⁹

3. CONCLUSION

Sacred Groves are the ideal center for biodiversity conservation. Various plants and animals that are threatened in the forest are well con-

served within these patches. These areas also provide habitat, water and nest-sites for many species of wildlife and birds. Ayurvedic and general medicinal plants that are not to be found in the forest are often concentrated in sacred groves. Rare, endangered, threatened and endemic species are abundant in sacred groves. Sacred groves also provide vital ecosystem services to local people. Sacred Groves are full with rich biodiversity and harbor many rare species of plants and animals. Sacred groves are important elements in the Biodiversity Conservation. There is vast diversity among India's Sacred Groves. The sacredness, religious beliefs and taboos play a significant role in promoting sustainable utilization and conservation of flora and fauna of the region. Sacred groves are protecting various plant and animal genes to protect the present and future of natural ecosystems and ecological balance. Sacred groves act as natural habitat, a laboratory, a gene bank, and a store-house of various-species.

Biodiversity is the life support system of our planet- we depend on it for the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the water we drink. Biodiversity is the cornerstone of our existence on earth. Indigenous communities all over the world lived in harmony with the nature and conserved its valuable biodiversity. Sacred groves in urban landscapes act as "lungs"

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