

# Sacred Groves and Ancient Principles of Conservation

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**Abstract:** Nature has always been important in the life of ethnic communities across the globe. Likewise the conservation of natural resources was based on the role of 'Sacred'. The underlying principles of ethnic philosophy of people residing in the mighty Himalay are based on the idea of spirituality which is the basis of conservation and is reflected in form of nature worship. This has resulted in evolution of sacred grooves or sacred landscapes. Sacred groves are patches of virgin forests dedicated to local deities and range from a few trees to several acres of forest land. These customary practices contribute in protection of bioresources. With increasing consciousness for environmental conservation, people believe that ecological value and economy are basically harmonizing. The necessity of conservation and sustainable use of natural resources has been mentioned in the ancient scriptures. However, increasing demands of people, alterations in habitat, over-exploitation and pollution have pressurized the resource wealth of Himalay and the sacred landscapes have become the victims of development. This paper intends to review the role of communities in managing the sacred landscapes in Himalayan region.

## 1. Introduction

Man has evolved from nature and eventually depends on nature for his existence. Till man understands the link between matter and universe, it is not possible to evolve the traditional wisdom which enables man to live in accordance with the nature. Culture, a system of beliefs, values and work of art helps man to cope-up with the existing world and is passed on from one generation to another. On the other hand, ecology is the relationship between man and his outer world. The term 'ecology' was coined by the German biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel in 1866 and refers basically to the surroundings and its daily operations and maintenance. The interaction of culture and ecology has been vital for the existence of human society and gave a new concept, i.e., cultural ecology where ecology is related to human culture. It links a society and its natural environment. Indian culture is based on the fundamental principle

of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' which means that 'the entire earth is one family'. As per the proverb, not only the man but even a tree are part of the family and is not considered as a non-living entity [1].

India is a sacred land, with glorious past and its people have attained the eternal flame amidst all mankind. 'Help Ever, Hurt Never', is another striking feature which specifies the uniqueness of Indian culture. It explains the theory of sharing and caring thereby spreading joy. It teaches us the lesson of teamwork and in turn, makes this world a better place to live. Indian culture perceives entire humanity as one entity. Sacred groves are the vast stretches of virgin forests, which have been maintained by the communities since times immemorial for their socio-cultural and religious connotations and are believed to protect the nearby people from disasters. Each such grove has legends, folklore, and myths which are believed to be the vital part of the sacred grove. Since such groves have been maintained by the indigenous and rural communities, they are believed to act as a linkage between the religion and cultural ethnicity which exists in these groves. Such sacred landscapes and grooves are found all over the world. Communities identify them in different ways and have evolved regulation for their conservation. These act as ideal hotspots for biodiversity conservation. Numerous threatened floral and faunal elements are well-conserved in these groves. The sacredness, spiritual philosophies and interdicts help in promoting the sustainable use and maintenance of its plants and animals.

However, the impacts of modernization and urbanization have not spared these grooves and even impacted the belief system of communities guarding these. In order to uphold the ecological balance, it is essential that such grooves be protected and the primitive norms evolved for the conservation are synchronized with the contemporary regulations. The ancient principles of Indian thought are the underlying principles of conservation. This paper is based on secondary data wherein an effort has been made to study the ancient principles, thoughts and practices linked with the conservation. The secondary data was collected from web sources,

books, articles published in various national and international journals.

## 2. Ancient Principles of Conservation

The legacy of Indian culture is governed by the thought of 'sacred' and the conservation of environment has remained its vital component where all plants and animals are considered sacred. The entire system was duty-based and the very thought of safeguarding the ecology as a part of one's duty still exists among the rural communities. The *Vedas*, *Puranas*, *Upanishads* and other old scriptures have detailed accounts of trees, plants, wildlife and their role in the life of people. According to *Yajnavalkya Smriti* cutting of trees was considered as an offence and there was a specific punishment for it. *Kautalya's Arthashastra* highlights the need of forest administration and Asoka's 5th pillar statement expresses his concern for all living creatures. Ancient civilizations were aware of the adverse effects of deforestation and loss of species. Hinduism, in its dictum declared that:

"Earth is our mother and we are all her children"

Atharv Ved

Hindu mythology believes in the presence of Supreme Being in each particle of nature and the presence of divinity is thought to be responsible for the sustenance of all living creatures and even the non-living things.

The Vedic literature has scientific and religious description of nature and conservational principles which states that:

"Do not cut trees because they remove pollution"

Rig Ved, 6:48:17

"Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere."

Yajur Ved, 5:43

"Don't destroy forests with tigers. Forests can't be protected without tigers and tigers can't live without forests because both safeguard each other."

Virat Parv, Mahabharata, 5.45-46

"It brings great sin if sacrificial fire is not offered to purify atmosphere; if trees are cut down on auspicious days, if human waste is dropped in water."

Shanti Parv, Mahabharata

The Hindu belief system evolved over the years is still followed, for instance, before laying the foundation stone of any building, priest performs *Bhoomi Pooja* to express the reverence, appease mother earth and seek forgiveness for digging. Certain plants, trees and rivers are considered sacred and are venerated. There are prayers in which all the elements of nature are saluted and shown respect.

In order to reinstate the thoughts of sacredness among people, the plants and animals have been given the status of gods and goddesses. God incarnates himself in different forms. The concept of ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, in a way symbolizes the theory of organic evolution. In order to illustrate the aquatic origin of animals, God incarnated in the form of a *Mathsya*, a fish, followed by an amphibious animal *Kurma*, a turtle; later the Almighty manifested in the form of *Varaha*, a boar, which is representative of terrestrial animal. This impressed various emperors to choose animals as the insignias of their dynasty. The rulers gave them prime position in art and architecture. The place of plants & trees in ecology had been well understood by Indians gurus, which is evident in great epics. The great epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* contain numerous incidences which describe the relationship between God and nature. Even in Islam, one finds a close harmony between ecology and man. In *Hadith* and *Quran*, it is mentioned that the earth being green and beautiful, with mountains and rivers has been shaped as a place of worship. It further lays stress for planting of trees as a charitable act.

People across the globe love to feed animals for the sheer joy of it. The cow worship is a living tradition in India and in addition to this, people worship monkey, elephant, bull, rat, variety of birds, fish, turtles, snakes and even ants. The poison-hooded serpents, symbolic of time, death, fertility, rebirth and creative energy are offered milk for providing divine protection under their spreading hoods. The *Bishnoi* tribe of western Rajasthan feed the blackbuck that roams wild in the surrounding desert. The crow is recognized with the remembrance of ancestors and offered food during the *Shradha*. Be it a temple water tank, a sacred lake or a holy river, one finds people feeding fish or turtles as a simple matter of piety. Not only the animals but the plants are important in the life of indigenous communities. It is believed that a person is honored in heaven for thousand years if he resides in a house where the *Tulsi* plant is grown. One is said to have *Tulsi* (*Ocimum sanctum*) leaves everyday due to its medicinal properties. Likewise, consumption of *ber* (*Zizyphus jujuba*) fruits are forbidden in Bengal until the Saraswati festival is over on the full-moon day of *Magh* (late winter). The restriction is to ensure full ripening of fruits and seed germination. Planting of

*Bilva* (*Aegle marmelos*) tree in the courtyard, pleases Goddess of wealth [2]. The saints, since times immemorial, advised people to grow more trees. There is description of *Ashoka vana*, in the Ramayana.

The Vedic *Rishis* revealed the need of performing daily *Yajna* for protecting ecology. *Dharmasastra* prohibited men from disturbing biodiversity and ecosystem as it is against the belief system of religion and it is considered a sinful act. In the epic age, man and environment exists in harmonious relationship. The *Rig Ved*, considered as the oldest manuscript dealing with relationship of environment and human beings, but *Athar Ved* has dealt precisely about various aspects of environment. These philosophical notions are believed to be the underlying cause of evolution of sacred groves. The tradition of offering groves to local deities has a long history. Sacred grooves are like ancient natural sanctuaries where the biodiversity is being protected by deity [3]. These are regarded as the mini-ecosystems and have valuable repository of bioresources. According to Joshi and Gadgil, 1991 these serve as an important refuge for rare and endangered medicinal plants [4]. Moreover, these sacred forests contribute to the atmospheric humidity, reduce temperature and create favorable microclimate for several organisms. They also help in preventing soil erosion by increasing water retention capacity. They too contribute for the conservation of watersheds and water sources. Since these are linked with the traditional religious and social beliefs of the communities, these give an identity to them.

### 3. Sacred Groves and Conservation

The sacred groves or sacred landscapes are found almost all over the world, including Africa, Asia, Europe, Austro-pacific region and America [5, 6]. In India, the sacred groves are found especially along the Western Ghats in the states of Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Besides this sacred groves have been reported from Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Manipur. Conventionally, the sacred groves are classified as:

- Traditional sacred groves, linked with village deity;
- Temple groves, around a temple
- Groves around burial or cremation-grounds

D. Brandis, the first Inspector General of Forests, initiated the documentation of sacred grooves. In 1973, Professor Madhav Gadgil and Dr. V. D. Vartak carried out floristic and ethno-botanical survey in the sacred groves of Maharashtra. The existence of

sacred groves along the Himalay was revolved by Burman in 1992. Sacred groves, exemplifying Himalayan villages include few trees to several acres of forest land and water sources dedicated to local deities. The instances of sacred groves located in the states of Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh are given here to elucidate the concept.

Jammu & Kashmir is a land of saints, sages, philosophers and mystics. Sacred groves are located throughout the state of Jammu and Kashmir. These are known as Banis and are under the control of religious institutions or management committees. More than ninety such sacred sites have been reported from the state. These groves are dedicated to Bua Sjawati ji, Bua Dati ji, Lord Hanuman, Goddess Vaishno Devi, Peer Baba, etc. Some of the plants which are found in these groves are Banyan, Mango, Indian Plum, Mountain ebony. In many groves with large areas, the forest products are gathered and the income generated belongs to the shrine controlling these groves. Gupta and Sharma (2013) reported sixteen sacred groves in Rajouri and their role in the conservation of biodiversity. Among the reported groves, the deities include Baba Qutubdin, Sain Abdul Aziz, Peer Khewe Shah, Wali Rafiq Sabib, Lord Ram, Lord Krishna and Vishnu. Shankaracharya sacred grove is one the sacred grooves of Kashmir maintained for aesthetic and recreational purposes. Some of the important plant species reported from this grove include *Platanus orientalis*, *Ephedra gerardiana*, *Pinus helepansis*, *Juglans regia*, etc. [7]. Studies carried out by Kumar, et al. 2011 showed that the forests in this sacred groove have plants with medicinal & magico-religious value for both Hindus and Muslims [8]. Priya and Sharma (2014) have talked about the deteriorating condition of nearly sixty sacred sites in Jammu City and its surroundings. These include few churches [9]. Sharma and Devi in 2014 reported the traditional way of plant diversity conservation in the sacred groves in Bhalwal Block of Jammu District [10]. Mughal and Kachhawa in 2015 surveyed nine sacred groves in different religious patches of Poonch district and reported woody flora belonging to 24 families with dominance of family Rosaceae [11].

Diversity and phyto-sociological analysis of tree species in sacred groves of Vijaypur Block, Samba (J&K) was carried out by Kour and Sharma in 2014. Twenty-eight tree species belonging to seventeen families were reported from fifteen sacred grooves. Some important trees in the groves are *Mangifera indica*, *Syzygium cumini*, *Eucalyptus citridora*, *Ficus religiosa*, etc. [12].

Himachal, on the other hand is sanctified with number of *Dev van* or sacred grooves, which not

only preserve the purity of the area but also safeguard its resources. 329 sacred groves have been documented in the state. In some sacred grooves even the touching of dry foliage and fallen fruits is banned and people believe that any chaos in the site, often upsets the presiding deity, whose wrath manifests in the form of natural calamities and diseases. Also, the area around the shrines is considered sacred where activities such as, cutting of trees, entry of lower caste people and women in menstrual cycle is prohibited. These groves are under the control of devta committees, who are believed to be influential in managing the rural communities. These sacred groves have well-defined rules and observance of these is a religious practice. In addition to defined sacred groves with large forests, there are certain sites which have religious connotation. Sharma and Gupta (2013) surveyed the villages in Himachal and documented animism & pantheism as an instinctive system of ecological restoration. In some villages there are sacred sites in the premises of village, which are linked with the folk deities. For the welfare of village community, these sites are thronged by villagers and sacrifices are made at each site [13].

The traditional knowledge, local institutions and implications for forest conservation and its significance was studied by Gupta (2008) in *Churdhar* protected area, which is located in Himachal Himalay. The villagers residing in this protected area have rights to agriculture; extraction & collection of timber, fuel wood, Non-Timber Forest Products and grazing, which have been defined through legal forest settlements. The local communities are individual right holders, whereas the pastoralists are issued grazing permits. The institutional arrangements include self-initiated systems, cooperatives, sacred forests and co-managed forest [14].

#### 4. Significance of Sacred Groves

In Himachal and Jammu & Kashmir these sacred groves have survived from pre-colonial to present days. While the sacred groves in Himachal are completely dedicated to village deities, the sacred groves in the state of Jammu and Kashmir are dedicated to Hindu Gods and Goddesses, besides Islamic divinities. These sacred groves are confined to private lands dedicated for the deity and protected forests. The religious beliefs and socio-cultural practices are responsible for the establishment of these sacred areas. No formal institution is constituted by the government for the maintenance of these groves, but the local people are voluntarily involved in its preservation. As far as the legal standing of these groves and sites is concerned, these are governed by private property laws; however,

there is no legal basis when *devban* is reserved or protected forest. The devta committees are registered under the 1860 Societies Registration Act. The maintenance of these groves is achieved through voluntary contributions and donations. The flexibility, local control and cultural integration are comparatively high in the sacred *devbans* as compare to shrines under the control of trusts. Some of the sacred sites in Jammu and Kashmir are under temple trusts. In addition to the ecological significance, the sacred groves have sociocultural role, for instance, religious connotation-- appeasement of deity or spirit; cultural--providing cultural space to the community in form of common property resource; wellbeing; economic--climate, farming and source of raw materials, herbs, wild edibles, etc.; psychosomatic--support for local people; academic--subject for research and academics. However, with the passage of time these sites are losing their significance. Some of the factors responsible for these changes are:

- Conversion of natural sacred site into formal temples;
- Diminishing reliance on traditional belief systems, which were more or less ritual based;
- Encroachment of forests resulted in shrinking of large groves;
- Gathering of timber and non-timber forest products;
- Grazing pressure due to increasing livestock
- Invasion by exotic weeds
- Rapid urbanization and infrastructure development;

#### 5. Concluding Remarks

The sacred groves, as in any other part of India, have great role in the conservation of bioresources. Sacred groves reflect the ancient traditions of conservation by ethnic communities which may be out of devotion, terror and feelings and is called as an demonstration hub of trees, threatening species, dispensaries of medicinal plants, regulators of watersheds, and gene banks of economic species. The increasing human activities and interference are responsible for the disturbance and degradation of these sacred landscapes, which has changed the structural and functional pattern of these sites and considerably affects the biodiversity. Prior to human intervention, the sacred groves use to illustrate a self-sustainable ecosystem with dynamic equilibrium.

In the recent years, the distribution of plant species has decreased because local users like hunter gatherers, folk healers and priests depend on ecosystem services for their livelihood and cultural lives. The biotic and abiotic components of sacred groves help in the moderation of the climate,

regulation of hydrology, maintenance of soil fertility, besides providing aesthetic value to the landscape. There is an urgent need for recognizing these traditionally valued sacred natural ecosystems at various levels and planning for their better management.

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