

The Dynamics Of Sacred Groves

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ABSTRACT The institution of sacred groves is an age-old system which probably dates as far back as the pre-agrarian times. While the anthropologists had mainly studied it as a cultural manifestation, the environmentalists have of late been trying to figure it exclusively from the ecological domains. This paper, however, makes a modest attempt to depict it from an ontological and ecological and political economic perspective. It concludes that the sacred groves is a multifaceted institution which is subject to changes according to the shifting fundamentally manifesting itself as a symbol of self assertion and the contours of which can be utilised for social development.

INTRODUCTION

The institution of sacred groves is an age old social regulatory system symbolising prudent behaviour and establishing norms against profligate use of nature. Sacred groves are usually patches of forests which are dedicated to deities. The groves have very strong structures attached to them, such that no trees are felled or branches lopped in them. Flowers, fruits, dried leaves and twigs are only allowed to be collected. Usually people are not permitted to enter into them with their shoes on and very frequently entry of women after attaining puberty is prohibited. The deities are often believed to be fiery in nature and that they severely punish the offenders. The size of the sacred groves usually varies between a clump of trees to 30 to 40 hectares. Sometimes they are, however found to be as large as 300 to 400 hectares. In India the sacred groves are widely to be found in Meghalaya, tribal areas of Central India and almost all over the Western Ghats. Many believe that the sacred groves in India originated in the pre-Vedic period. Gadgil and Vartak (1976) writes about the

sacred groves in Western Ghats, where they are most widely distributed in the country, "most of the cults around which sacred groves exist are mother goddess cults. The images of the deities are generally uniconic, in the form of tandalas or stones of the shape of a rice grain, from 20 to 50 cm long axis. They largely exist in the open, and many do not tolerate any shelter, punishing the misguided worshipper who tries to provide them with one. The cults are often associated with ancestor worship. Small round stones representing ancestors are generally set by the side of the deities. The deities are very ferocious in nature, and mete out serious illness or death to any offender. They generally demand animal sacrifices to be placated, and stories of human sacrifices in the recent past are still current." D.D. Kosambi (1962) states that they are usually to be found along the pre-agrarian trade routes and at cross roads. Frequently the deities associated with the sacred groves are mother goddesses.

The main objective of this paper is to elicit the important social dimensions related to the sacred groves for not only understanding the reasons for their existence but also to realise the circumstances under which they are subjected to changes. An effort is also made to counter the common assumption that the sacred groves are now being destroyed due to attenuation of faith in religion. It has rather been argued that sacred groves involve a complex whole of social institutions of which religion is just one. To be more precise this institution has been to be viewed more from the dimension of political economy. An attempt has been made here to reveal the dynamics of sacred groves mainly by drawing up on illustrations of several

groves which were observed during a rapid survey undertaken in Ambegaon and Junnar taluka of Pune, Radhanagari taluka of Kolhapur and Dhanora taluka of Gadchiroli Districts in Maharashtra. Some references to prevailing situation in Africa too have been made by consulting secondary source materials.

ENVIRONMENTAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SACRED GROVES

The sacred groves have in the recent years drawn the attention of the environmentalists due to their undisturbed conditions which enable them to be repositories of gene pools. In other words, the deep undisturbed foliage of the groves create a micro climate which permits regeneration and sustenance of biotic species not usually found in the surroundings. With regard to the distribution pattern of sacred groves Gadgil and Vartak (1976) write, "The groves lie at all locations, ranging from the floor of the river valley, slopes at various distances to the top, plateaus at intermediate levels and rest of the hill. Thus they serve to represent all sorts of vegetation from the stunted forest on the exposed hill forests to the tall luxurious growth in the ravines." Also quite often the sacred groves trap the ground water such that very frequently water sources originate from them.

Apart from environmental significance the sacred groves are also indicative of the phenomenon of ethno-environmental management. As indicated earlier, it is a social institution which permits management of biotic resources through people's participation. Unfortunately the social significance of the sacred groves have not been studied in depth and the environmental aspects are over emphasized.

It has been observed during field investigations that many of the sacred groves are located at places of origin of water sources rivers. The Ghod River in Pune for instance

originates from the Bhairoba sacred grove of Ahupe village. The Kukur river of Junne taluka in the same district originates from the groves surrounding the famous Kukreswar temple.

The forest surrounding the 'Rewala' place of origin of Dudh-Ganga river in Radhanagari taluka of Kolhapur district is extremely well preserved and the local Hindus never enter into it. The Rewala is located inside a gorge where the water falls from a cliff of about 30 metres to accumulate into a deep pool. The local people strongly believe that the place is haunted by evil spirits and the fish found there should never be eaten.

SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SACRED GROVES

In general the local people are unable to assign any benefit of the sacred groves to the community. During a recent study conducted by the author the Mahadeo Kolis of Pune district of Maharashtra, most commonly of the people stated that the sacred groves are of no use to them as they are prohibited from procuring any thing from there. Most usually they state that the groves provide beauty to the deities. Gadgil and Vartak (1976), however, state that with rapid deforestation the groves in recent time are gaining more importance in the daily life of the local population as the only remaining sources of forest produce "Besides medicinal plants such as *Entada phaseoliden*, they supply dead wood for fuel and leaf litter for the initial burning of the plot in paddy culture. The sacred groves also occasionally supply timber in an emergency such as the destruction of an entire village settlement through fire." Mitra and Pal (1994) report that at Tivri village in Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra the sacred grove is dedicated to dead persons. For centuries the villagers have collected wood for cremation from the grove.

Garden and Mtallo (1990) have indicated that traditional forest resources (TFR) play educational and demonstrative role in the society: "The TFR-especially the Haymada and the women's TFR serve as the traditional 'classroom'. Through initiation rites like circumcision and traditional teaching (in songs and dances) transmission of information about cultural traditions and practices of the local society takes place. The TFR are important places in effecting social conformity and teaching beliefs about the nature of universe. It serves as an effective practical demonstration of ecologically correct behaviour when the Wazee teach the new generation to conserve the vegetation around the natural springs." Fernandes and Menon (1988) too have observed grove in the dense forest was used as the initiation ground for teenagers. During their initiation into adulthood, they had to live on Minor Forest Produce (MFP) they could collect in the sarna, the animal they could hunt and twigs they could break with their hands. Akhara was their dancing ground where they could select their life partners."

The sacred groves play very important social role though they may not occur very distinctively in the day-to-day activities of the local people. Garden and Mtallo (1990) state that in Tanzania the Traditional Forest Reserves (TFR) play an important function as the place where traditional beliefs are practised and this brings into contact of diverse ethnic entities like the Loa, Noelangw and the Quambamemot. S. Senugupta (1965) similarly notes the social unifying role of the sacred groves, "In some villages, when there is a Jagrat Devata or a guardian deity in the form of even a tree, offerings of rice, fruits, sweets, flowers pouring water with incense and camphor, are made every day by the village folk irrespective of caste and creed. Even the Mohammedans are allowed to pray or to offer gifts to this village deity as there is no religious bar and bias in the worship.

Kishore Saint (1994) states that very often there is not rigid division between the sacred and secular aspects of sacred groves. "In Rajasthan for instance *gochar* (common pastures) and *oraans* (sacred wood lots around temples) usually overlap, which is similar to the sacred attitude towards cows."

The sacred groves often play the role of maintaining the territorial network in regions as folk base of identity management running concurrently with the state administration. The main sacred grove at Waki village in Kolhapur district of Maharashtra is that of the Wagnath deity, which deity is sheltered in a temple within the grove. The temple is managed by the village Tarun Mandal or the Yuth Club. The deity is worshipped by the villagers once in every week. Besides a big fair is held centering the deity once in the month of February every year. This fair is locally called 'gondal'. During the gondal people from far flung areas of Kolhapur and Nipani of Karnataka also visit the temple. Wakoba is considered to have a brother deity at Budhagarh village about 25 km away. This deity is called Vairideo. Though the Waki people hardly visit Budhagarh, a close association exists between the two villages. The gondal in both the villages are celebrated on the same day. Infact the date of the gondal at Waki is fixed only after a messenger from Budhagarh informs about their date of gondal. The association seems to foster regional identity over a large geographical area.

Apart from the inter village level dynamics, the Wakoba sacred grove also provides the basis of intra village level dynamics. During Dusserah, the mukut - the clan totem of the village Patil and many other villagers which comprises of a few brass masks, are taken to the Wakoba temple for nine days. During the stay at the temple, the mukut is carried on a palanquin on the shoulders by the village barber, washerman and a carpenter. On the ninth day the mukut is returned

to the Patil's house. But on the way the mukut is carried to the houses of different high caste people in the order of their social ranking. Thus the ritual on the one hand fosters social solidarity, on the other it reinforces the social hierarchy.

The 73 ha large Kalubai sacred grove of Taleran village of Junnar taluka in Pune district similarly attract about 2-3 thousand tribals from Pune, Nashik and Thane districts during the annual Jatra (when the deity returns to the temple after a month long hunt) which involves sacrificing more than 150 goats and subsequent potluck. Such community gathering within the sacred grove certainly reinforces the moral basis of identity formation in absence of a strong political party of the tribals in the state.

The sacred groves had sometimes in history provided scope to the soldiers in carrying out guerilla warfare. The Janji mahal at village (hidden inside a sacred grove) is said to have been constructed by Raja Ram Maharaja during the Mughal period. It is said the soldiers used to hide in this grove after carrying out raids, it is also believed the Shivaji Maharaj prepared his onslaught on Shayesta Khan from the Janji Mahal. Shivaji's edict forbidding felling of trees in the forest also provides credence to the strategic importance of the sacred groves. Vasant Sawant (1990) has stated about the politico-economic role played by the Ughwai sacred grove at Phonda ghat in Kolhapur. The grove served the purpose of providing shelter to the traders trading between the Deccan mainland and the Konkan coasts. Besides Shivaji's army carried out depredations of the coastal from the sacred grove in the region.

Sometimes the sacred groves play the buffer role between two or more neighbouring profligous groups. The existence of sacred groves in the Mahadeo Koli areas can be said to have played a similar role to some extent between the Mahadeo Kolis and the Gavlis who used to dwell there

earlier. Keeton (1990) has stated the forests between Burma and India were deliberately not exploited by the British so that buffer could be maintained between the British troops and the French troops who were occupying various parts of South-East Asia. There are many sacred forests in the Tangkhul areas of Manipur which are historically supposed to have played the buffer role between feuding head hunting villages. At Tuinlem village there was a sacred lake called 'Chengngaye' with Kameyo Bame as its deity. The lake acted as a buffer between the Cheng tribesmen and the Tangkhuls.

SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF SACRED GROVES

W.A. Rodgers (1989) has stated that in Meghalaya certain groves were declared sacred when they were about to be destroyed by the forest department. Madhav Gadgil (1983) has pointed out that Buchanan thought the system of sacred groves was a contrivance of the people to prevent the colonial government from claiming their property. He quotes Buchanan, "The forest are property of the gods of the village in which they are situated, and trees ought not to be cut without having obtained leave from the ... headman of the village The idol receives nothing for granting this permission; but the neglect of this ceremony of asking his leave brings his vengeance on the guilty person. This seems, therefore, merely a contrivance to prevent the government from claiming the property." Bayreuth (1991) similarly observes that Die Miji Kenda, a cluster of nine tribes in Africa hid strategically in the Kayas forest and declared the surrounding forests as sacred.

Sarna symbolises the core of a tribal settlement in Chotanagpur. Whenever a new settlement is started a sarna also has to be mandatorily created. The Sarnas within the tribal settlements in the industrial townships

of Ranchi, Jamshedpur, Rourkela and Asansol, albeit very small in size, can be construed as means of establishing and asserting their settlement right by the tribals of the region. Incidentally these townships were originally inhabited by the tribals who have been displaced due to establishment of big industries.

Sacred groves are sometimes used as means of retaining control over the resources as well. The Gonds Mendha village in Gadchiroli district have yet maintained the sacred grove at the place of their old settlement (along with a new one at the site of the present village) and have opposed the State appropriation of the forest around the old settlement measuring almost 30 sq. km. The old sacred grove helps them in asserting their moral rights over the forests in the surroundings. Similarly, when some of the villagers of Doni villagers in Pune district along with some government officials stressed on forming a temple trust for the wandeo sacred grove, the priest (who is also the custodian of the grove) opposed the move by introducing a few new deities and by increasing the number of days of worshipping the old deities (which in return reinforced the moral authority of the people over the sacred grove).

It has been noticed that of late sacred groves are being felled at many places. Gadgil and Vartak (1981), Mitra and Pal (1994) state that religiousity associated with the sacred groves are fast disappearing and they are being felled. Gadgil and Vartak also indicate that rapid industrialisation is too responsible for the disappearance of the sacred groves. Though these scholars may be right in their assessments to some extent, this may not always be true. During a rapid in their assessments to some extent, this may not always be true. During a rapid survey of the area predominated by Mahadeo Koli in Pune district where rapid deforestation is going on, the sacred groves have in fact been reported to be increasing in size at some villages. In

cities like Pune, Bombay and Delhi 'smriti vans' memorial forests have been initiated at number of places mainly through the initiative of local citizens and some time even at the instance of the State. The role of the State in this matter, however has not been always very consistent. The implementation of the Roman Law of Terra nullius and disregarding corporate rights along with bureaucratic wranglings have often been the root cause of destruction of the sacred groves.

The sacred groves may often take a different shape with the change in village boundaries. It has been noticed that - Mariai sacred grove - the groves attached to the deity of the small pox become subject to such changes very often among the Mahadeo Kolis. It has been found at Borghar that when its boundary was extended to its present location the Mariai sacred grove was converted into a temple and the trees were felled off. Similarly when the boundary of Taleran village of Junnar taluka transgressed into the adjoining village Pargaon the sacred grove of Mariai/Muktabai was felled off and a new temple has been constructed in its place. In case of Pokhri village in the same district when it got merged with Pangri village the Mariai grove got converted into a temple and now it is the gaondev or village deity.

In many Mahadeo Koli village where Harijans or Scheduled Castes were holding sacred groves as *inam* lands (grants given by the Muslim, Maratha and the British long back), new temples have been constructed after destroying the sacred groves. This has been possible mainly due to the Harijans (scheduled castes) getting converted to Buddhism. It may, however, be noted that the new temples are not that of Buddha but of the previous deities. At village Malin for example, one of the groves have been constructed (after felling the trees) is that of 'Munir' - 'Vir' - and old legendary hero, and the other is that of the 'Harva Vir', his younger brother. People of all faith and eth-

nic background flock to these temples to ask for boons.

A close look into the functioning of sacred groves often reveals that they really involve vibrant social forces. The Sarna Dharam in Chotanagpur is basically linked to the institution of 'Sarna', the local name for sacred groves. Since the beginning of this century the Sarna Dharm became an embodiment of the 'Jharkhand' or 'forest land' movement of the area. The tribals there are fighting for greater autonomy, statehood and right to self determination for quite some time. The Sarna Dharm is not restricted only among the tribals retaining their traditional religion, but is subscribed to even by the Christian tribals. P.C. Hembram (1983) writes, "in Chotanagpur and its adjacent region the tribals can be divided into two major linguistic group - Mundari and Kurukh (Oraon). But the concept and practices centering round the Sal grove (jaher or sarna) have helped to unify the heterogeneous mass to tribals into a solid block. The tribal leaders in the area of politics have been quick to seize the concept of Sarna Dharam. They have pointed out the many strands of similarities interlacing various groups. What began as an effort to re-interpret the tribal religion and to refute the Dekos' notion that tribal religion defies explanation, has provided a common ground to rally the tribals to achieve better economic, social and political goals."

The sacred groves institution has sometimes suffered due to religious suppression as the profligous dominant caste Hindu societies imposed Hinduism on the tribals. But the sacred groves are being revived again at places by the tribals to mark their protest. The sacred grove of Danteswari deity at Dhanora in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra is one such instance. All the different Gond clans seek a common identity through the Danteswari temple located in Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh. The Gond king of Jagdalpur had a special role in worship of

the Danteswari deity. The Danteswari sacred grove of Dhanora similarly had a special significance for integrating all the 32 villages of Dhanora zamindari into one political entity. Leaders of all the 32 villages used to assemble at the grove for taking political developmental decisions. The practice was abandoned with establishment of the modern state administration. However, of late the Danteswari sacred grove has been again revived by the people for making crucial 'informal' decision which are often in response to the policies of the State - (often detrimental to the interests of the local people). The *Jangal Bachao, Manav Bachao Andolan* (Save Forests, Save Man Movement) has also started mobilising the people of the taluka from the Danteswari sacred grove. The *Jangal Bachao, Manav Bachao Andolan* has been going on in the district and also parts of Bastar in Madhya Pradesh (the adjoining state) for the last 4-5 years.

This agitation is almost fully comprised of the local tribals and some of the local NGOs. Their demands are mainly against the authoritarian State forest policies - like one which has taken away their *nistar* lands (village forests) or the policy which enables the industries to procure forests produce like bamboo at very cheap rate. They are also opposed to the forest policies which have abrogated many of the tribal customary rights. Besides the movement is opposed to the malpractices of the forest officials.

Interestingly the people of the taluka have also started worshipping Ravana once a year at the Danteswari grove. It is believed by many that Ravana worship is a part of the local assertion against the caste Hindu domination (an embodiment of the State). Ravana *pūja* signifies worshipping the demon whom Lord Rama vanquished and killed for his sins, like stealing his wife and harassing the Hindu saints of the forest - all these are stated in the famous Hindu epic '*Ramayana*'. Many of the Gond tribals of the area state

that the *rishis* (saints) as stated in Ramayana were the agents of the Hindu States. These *rishis* were opposed to the forest dwellers and destroyed the forests by their repeated *yajnas* (fire worship) which consumed volumes of wood. The *rakshashas* (demons) which attacked the *rishis* were non other than the tribals. Ravana was the *Rakshas* king opposed to the *rishis* and the Hindu State.

Similarly Down to Earth (January 31, 1994) reports about the positive assertion of the people of Raghunathpur centering around the sacred grove, "The villagers of Raghunathpur proudly display the 14-ha sarna they saved from the axe of a landlord. In recent times, the villagers have revived their community institution, the *baisi*, which now not only looks after the forest and regulates its use, but also governs other aspects of village life."

SACRED GROVES AND SYMBOLIC RESPONSE TO STATE POLICIES

The villagers of Ratnagiri district in Maharashtra adopted a novel way of asserting their moral control over the sacred groves. About 30 years back when the revenue department took over the legal control over the all the sacred groves in the district, the villagers decided to sell some of the trees in each of the groves and construct big temples in place of the small deities placed earlier. They also took over the management of the temples. This way they could retain their moral control over the sacred groves though they are under State possession.

Sometimes moral assertion of the people through the sacred groves are also through the acts of withdrawal. The tribes of a village Pendri in Raigad district of Maharashtra for instance, removed the deity from the sacred grove and stopped all rituals after the gram panchayat dominated by the Agri caste Hindus sold away the teak trees of the grove about two years back. At village Tungi in the

same taluka it was, however, found that the Mahadeo Kolis who are politically recessive in the region (though they are dominant within the village) felled several trees in the sacred grove as they were annoyed that the grove and other temple lands were recorded in favour of the Maratha priests.

Infact the conflict between the two groups was taken to the court. While the Mahadeo Kolis asserted that the Tungi deity was the settlement deity or the *gaon* devi, the Marathas claimed that it was their clan deity and therefore the land and forests attached to the deity belonged to them (as was recorded by the revenue officials during the land settlement survey in early 1960s). In almost all the villages with sacred groves in Karjat Taluka similar conflicts have arisen and the people have indirectly voiced their resentment against the State. In all the cases the State refused to accord community ownership status to the sacred groves by following the colonial laws of *Res Loci Siteae* and *Terra Nullius*. This means ignoring local customary laws of people and imposition of command law of the State. The State does not recognise community ownership and states that should no individual claim be made on a piece of land, then it vests with the State.

Very recently it has come to be noticed that in many of the villages inhabited by the Mahadeo Koli the policy of the state government to declare hamlets of villages with a population over 300 persons as new revenue villages has created a volatile situation centering the sacred groves. In majority of the cases the *gaothans* or the central villages are politically dominant over the hamlets and have the settlement deities with the sacred groves near them. Some of the deities with sacred groves are located near the wadis or the hamlets. After the promulgation of government policy many of the hamlets consolidated their hold over the sacred groves next to their settlements. Even entry of the villagers from the *gaothans* (main village settle-

ment) is prohibited. Talmachi wadi of Nimgiri village of Junnar taluka in Pune district provides one of the best such illustrations. The Talmachi wadi people invited their agnate kins to settle in the hamlet as the first step. Secondly they stopped entry to the Nimgiri people into the Waghdeo sacred grove and they moved the court against one Nimgiri villager in whose name the grove was recorded. Without waiting for the court verdict they have declared the grove a common property. Every year 20 households of Talmachi wadi on rotation cultivate the land principally belonging to the Waghdeo deity of the grove. Besides, the myrobalan trees in the sacred grove are auctioned every year among the Talmachi wadi people. This could be possible mainly due to reinforcement of the myths related to the Waghdeo deity. The Mahadeo Koli of Menumberwadi of the same district have similarly carved out a separate village from Asane and declared the Kalamjai deity in the sacred grove next to the hamlet as the village deity. They also have a Wandeo sacred grove which is usually not entered by the people of the Asane old village. The Kolis of the three hamlets Kaluwadi, Umberwadi and Ghodwadi of another adjoining village Borghar have come together to make a demand for a separate village. Since the last seven years they are organising a two day 'yatra' which comprises of cultural programmes, wrestling competition, continuous psalms and collective feasting. During the yatra the people from far flung villages assemble and stay within the premises of the Kalubai sacred grove. These three hamlets have also pooled resources together to construct a temple of Kalubai.

At village Malin adjoining Borghar in Ambegaon taluka of Pune district, three of its hamlets, Koknewadi, Lembhewadi and Pasarwadi are trying to form a separate village. They like to have Kalamjai located in the sacred grove near Koknewadi as the village deity. They also celebrate the 'Agor Saat'

(pre sowing ceremony) separately at the Waghdeo sacred grove located near Lembhewadi. Similar dynamics has also been observed in the village of Radhanagri Taluka of Kolhapur district (Maharashtra). After the declaration of the government resolution, Chapodi village picked up a quarrel with its parent village Waki and on a minor pretext stopped bringing the palanquin from Waki during the annual yatra and subsequently made a demand to form a separate revenue jurisdiction which it attained in the long run.

In Maharashtra a new problem has cropped up with regard to the sacred groves ever since the Maharashtra Private Forest Acquisition Act was enacted in 1975. Consequently many of the large sacred groves in the vicinity of Reserved/Protected forests have been acquired by the forest department. Since the said Act does not have the provision of appointing a Settlement Officer (contravening the Indian forest Act of 1927) the sacred groves were overnight declared as Reserved/Protected forests without giving the public a chance to make their representations. Unfortunately under such situation the government apparently considered the priests as the owners of the groves rather than considering to be community assets. At a few places the people have tried to oppose this, but they seem to have failed in their efforts as they mainly tried to retrieve the sacred groves in their vicinity without fighting some of the anti-people provisions of the 1975 Act. The general public and the intelligentsia in the state are unfortunately totally ignorant about such a fallacy.

SACRED GROVES AND SYMBOLIC RESPONSE TO NGO INTERVENTION

In the recent years the sacred groves are witnessing another phenomena as the NGOs have started interfering with them. At Dhamni village close to Karjat in Raigad district when a socially well meaning NGO encouraged a tribal hamlet (but ignoring the

others) to take up plantation of medicinal plants in a sacred grove close to it (Somjai sacred grove). The agency paid Rs. 1000/- to the people to make a fence of thorny bushes and for planting the saplings. The fence was, however, destroyed by the cattle in no time and the plants were eaten up. Also later due to negligence of the people the surrounding grass caught fire and the remaining saplings too were burnt out. Right now only two or three trees planted by the agency are surviving. It is curious that the agency should have given any money for the the plantation as the grove symbolises the self regulatory system of the community. The local people had in fact contributed Rs. 14,000/- for construction of the temple which they had earned by digging a pond financed by the Panchayat. This was done just before planting of the trees. The people could also perhaps have been mobilised similarly to plant the saplings.

Secondly, the NGO also ignored the fact that the small herbs and shrubs in the grove are cleared every year before the 'yatra' (annual festival which takes place in the grove) to allow the people to sit and rest. Most the plants sown in the grove were medicinal herbs and shrubs, and they were likely to be cut ever otherwise for the yatra. The local villagers are also extremely disenchanted with the NGO as it did not contribute anything to construct the temple. It is not surprising that they let the cattle into the grove and took no care of the small saplings.

Bhimashankar Project, a branch of an NGO, Maharashtra Arogya Mandal too has been recently funding through foreign assistance certain Mahadev Koli villages to make path ways within the groves and beautify them like the part are landscaped in cities. In some places it has also dug trenches around the groves to prevent entry of cattle into them. It is thereby not only disrespecting the tribal ethos but also undermining the very basis of social assertion and moral basis of

community functioning which the sacred groves symbolise. The basis of ethno-environment management system is also thoroughly disregarded in the process. No wonder that the saplings planted along the trenches with their help have all wilted due to want of care. But the act of arrogant benediction has not gone unchallenged. The youth of Pimpri village have thwarted off the overtures of Bhimshankar Project and have recently put up thorn fences around their sacred grove to ward off browsing animals. At village Malin the tribals seeing the activity of Menuberwadi sacred grove (initiated through Bhimshankar Project) have shown their desire to clear of the thorny hedged and plant flower and fruit trees at the Warsubai sacred grove. But when they asked for the permission from the deity it ordered the villagers to seek permission from the mother Warsubai deity located at Sukalbada village in Junner Taluka. Since it is very difficult to reach the deity which is located on the top of the highest mountain of the district people have deferred their visit to the same. There are now reconsidering about the decision to do the beautification work. They have been forced to do so all the more due to the fact that almost all the fruit trees planted with the financial assistance of Soil Conservation Department by the Harijans at the Munir sacred grove have died because of water scarcity and intrusion of cattle.

In southern Maharashtra as well where the sacred groves have been registered with Paschim Maharashtra Deosthan Samity (a State sponsored Society) people have made protest rallies wherever clandestine dealings by the Samity officials and vested interest were made public.

SACRED GROVES : SYMBOL OF GLOBAL SELF ASSERTION OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Sacred groves have become rallying point

for many of the indigenous peoples in different parts of the world outside India as well. In Paraguay when all the land of the indigenous people were declared private, the local tribals rallied hard and succeeded in getting 7,600 hectares of the sacred hill of Pai Tavytera, Jasuka Venda declared in favour of three Mbya communities. In Northern Territory of Australia and aborigines have fought for long to retain their statutory power on their sacred sites. In fact the Jawoyn people succeeded after 13 long years of the struggle with the government, in getting the title deeds on some of their traditional lands. The Jawoyn Aboriginal Land Trust has now agreed to lease out a portion of the National Park to the aborigines and permit them to practise their traditional hunting and food gathering and for ceremonial or religious purpose.

CONCLUSION

The impression which we thus gather about the sacred groves is that it is a multifaceted social institution. It is not just an inane physical entity as is usually projected. It symbolises the dynamic social forces linked with access and control over resources (it also obcourse is linked to the aesthetic values of the concerned communities). This assertion of the people may not be just restricted to the struggle between neighbouring communities, as at times it may also project as an assertion of local communities against the states, nations and even against international hegemonic forces. Viewed this way the institution is not just restricted to the realm of myth as generally portrayed. It is very much a part of social reality where the myths

are created according to the needs of the community - very often social assertion. This assertion in this core appears to be often much stronger than the command laws of the State. It becomes a symbol of liberation. Among many of the peasant communities it symbolises their very existence on the principles of moral binding rather than coercive power of the State. If properly oriented these principles can be certainly used for ensuring autogenous process of social development including management of the environment.

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