

Religious and Cultural Perspectives of a Sacred Site - Sitabari in Rajasthan

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ABSTRACT In India, sacred sites and/or groves occur under a variety of ecological situations. Sacred groves are referred by different names in various parts of the country. In India, sacred sites or groves are being protected and safeguarded through time immemorial. The present paper deals with the religious and cultural aspects of a sacred site of Sitabari in Rajasthan, which is place of great socio-religious importance to Sahariya tribals.

UNESCO's Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme on sacred sites and cultural values is important, as it facilitates a better understanding of these self-organised systems of traditional resource management. Many traditional societies preserved a portion of the natural ecosystem for cultural and religious reasons. Concern for water and soil management seems to be integrated with the religious, biodiversity and social motives behind sacred area concept. In semi arid/arid Rajasthan, ponds are integral components of sacred groves. Thus social and religious functions of sacred areas are linked to their ecological functions. Culturally, these sites and groves are of considerable interest as they exemplify phases of social interaction with the local ecosystems. The practises allowed or prohibited in them often reveal much about the attitudes of various societies to nature. Sacred sites may serve as meeting points for local, thus creating a sense of belongingness.

In India, sacred sites and groves occur under a variety of ecological situations, in north-eastern India, Western Ghats in southern India, in Bastar region in Madhya Pradesh in central India or in arid region of Rajasthan. Gadgil and Vartak (1976) recognised four important regions for sacred groves in India: Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Northeast, the Western Ghats, Aravalli Hills of Rajasthan and the Sarguja, Chanda and Bastar areas in central India. Roy Burman (1992) found

sacred groves all along the Himalayas from north west to northeast. In Kerala there are village groves, temple groves and groves on private property where snakes are worshipped. Ramakrishnan (1998) described a sacred landscape of Damojong in West Sikkim. The sacred landscape of Damojong stretches from Khangchen-dzonga peak down to sub-tropical forest below, and includes forests, lakes and rivers, as well as historical monuments and systems of terraced agriculture.

Sacred groves are referred by different names in various parts of the country e.g. in Darjeeling hills the groves are called *Deorali*; these are at the meeting points of bridle paths from various directions; in Khasi and Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya, the sacred groves are known as *Lakynthang*; in Mizo Hills these are "Safety forests" from which wood, etc., is not removed; in central India the groves of Dudh and Dhelki Kherias are called *Jankar* or *Sarna*; among Santals, the groves are referred to as *Jaher*. Gonds call their sacred groves *Pen-geda* (Roy Burman, 1992); Munda call their grove as *Sarna*; in Maharashtra these are called *Deorais* or *Deorani*; in Kerala these are known as *Kavus*; in Rajasthan these are known as *Maalwan*, *Oraons*, *Vanis*, *Kenkris*, or *Jogmaya* or *Shamlet Dehs*.

In India, sacred sites or groves are being protected and safe guarded through time immemorial, either by the acts of worshipping, adoring and religious or spiritual beliefs, or by offerings/rituals. Sacred sites (groves, grasslands, ponds, pools, stretches of streams and rivers, lagoons, coastal areas) are typical of small scale societies largely practising subsistence economies (Johannes, 1981; Gadgil and Berkes, 1991). These may be characterised as self organised conservation systems, as opposed to the hunting preserves of the elite or wildlife sanctuaries or national parks

which are conservation systems organized by a state apparatus. Other self organized systems of resource management include village wood lots, pastures and irrigation tanks (Ostrom, 1990).

The local people observe a strict code of conduct in protecting the sanctity of sacred groves or sites. Human infrastructures are normally not allowed inside the sacred grove or site except to perform rituals and offer prayers and offerings to propitiate the deities. Any material of plant or animal origin is forbidden to be taken out except on certain exceptional cases or occasions.

Sacred sites are locally specific. What is sacred can only be expressed according to the collective forces and relations in both historical and mythological time. Reference or memory places act as organic markers to register past events in individual lives as well as to maintain the cultural continuity and integrity of an entire people's identity. Such markers species and sites as social 'Keystone' symbols has been discussed by Ramakrishnan (1996) whose enduring pressure helps in the process of cultural continuity.

It is strange that why some places or features of the landscape become sacred, while others are considered as taboo. Do sacred groves, forests or sites come to reflect a different set of symbolic values to these places. Environmental topography, and physiographical elements represent critical variables to sacred association in a particular landscape.

In small subsistence societies certain natural features in landscape used for daily needs such as collection of water, cutting fuel wood, and other forest-produce are of importance and become symbolic markers to demarcate territory, ownership of resources and ancestral connection to land. Impermanence, transience and renewal are therefore central themes to all local and traditional resource users for both functional as well as symbolic and spiritual resources. As scientific disciplines, ecological anthropology, ethnobiology and historical ecology explore these links between environmental stability and cultural change by examining relationship between ecological change and associative shifts in spiritual attachment invested in landscape (Crumley, 1996).

Range of functions of these sacred sites are economic, religious, social and environmental.

Number of taboos and prohibitions serve to conserve these sacred sites and groves. Different cultures have various rules of behaviour or code of conduct in regard to sacred groves and sacred sites.

Malhotra (1998) suggested a five level hierarchy of sacred groves in terms of their geographical influence: village or hamlet level where only inhabitants of the village/hamlet or even different groups/different castes in multiethnic situations have their own groves; Intra-village, local level, the regional level and pan-Indian character.

There is vast variation in legal status and management of sacred groves. In terms of the legal tenurial rights, the sacred groves fall under three categories:

- (i) Under the control of state forest department.
- (ii) Under the control of revenue and other government departments.
- (iii) Privately owned (Ibid).

The present paper deals with the religious and cultural aspects of sacred site of Sitabari in Rajasthan (Fig.1) where Sitabari fair is held. Estimated congregation of 50,000 people from all communities attend the fair which serve both religious and commercial purposes. Visitors attending the fair take a dip in the *Kunds* (ponds) and offer grain, *Batashas* (sugar wafers), jaggery, coconuts, cash etc., to various temples located here.

SITABARI

Landscape: The sacred site of Sitabari is situated in the southwestern region of Rajasthan, a region widely known as Hadaoti (Hadavati), the land of Hadas. The Hadas are a major branch of the great Chauhan clan of *Agnikula* (Fire Dynasty) Rajputs. Deccan plateau is an expanse of fertile plain having rich black cotton soil. It is watered by several rivers, giving a verdant look. Vegetation of the Deccan plateau and the surrounding areas were once thickly forested and teemed with wildlife, including tigers for which area was famous.

The forests in the outliers of the Vindhya and Aravallis are of mixed deciduous type. The common species are *Anogeissus pendula*; *Butea monosperma*; *Diospyros melaoxylon*; *Sterculia urens* and *Cassia fistula* etc.

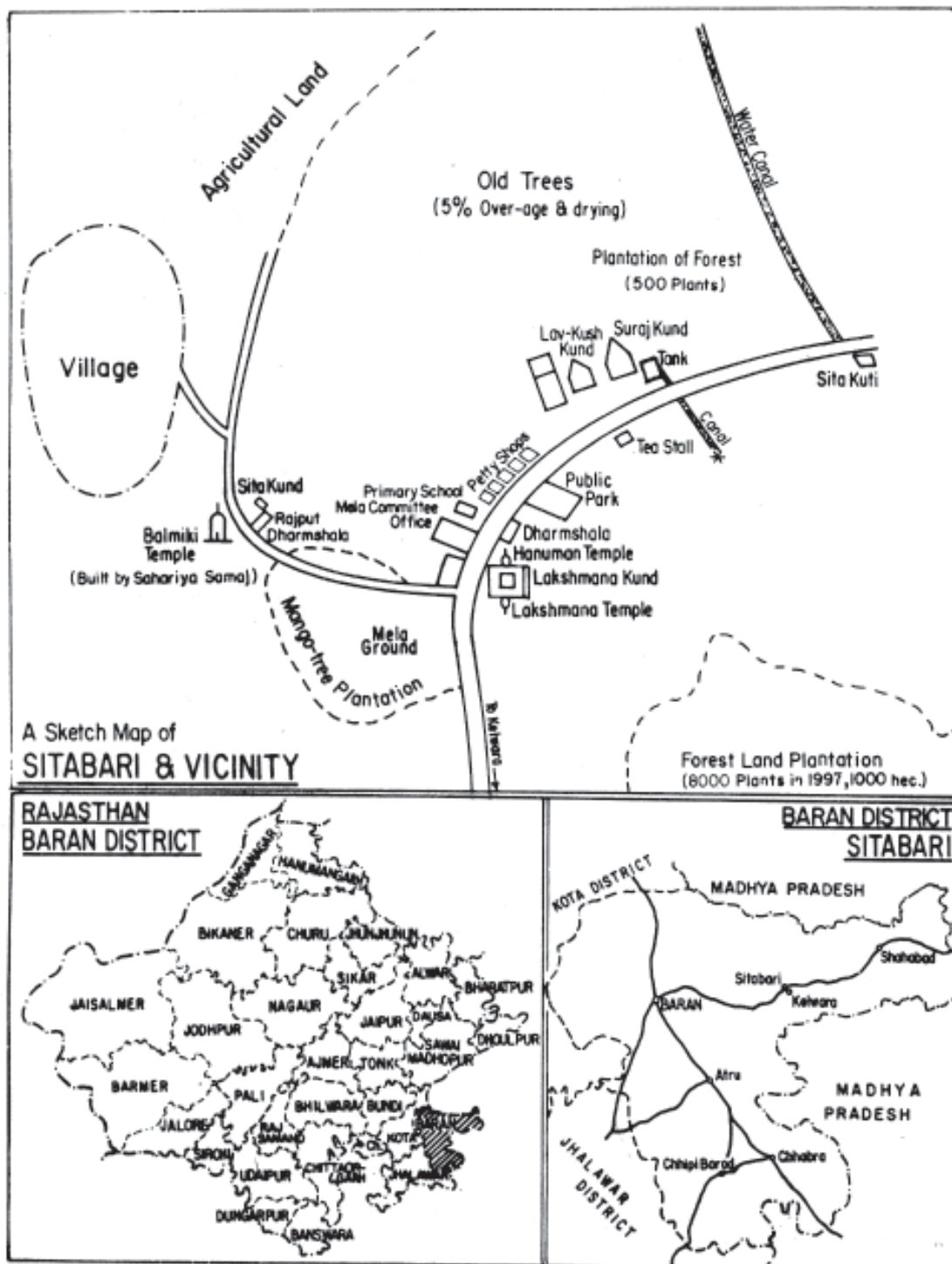


Fig. 1.

Forests with different dominant species in the area are *Anogeissus pendula* forests, mixed dedication forests, (*Boswellia serrata* and *Lannea coromandelica*), *Acacia catechu* forests and Bamboo brakes. Unfortunately, most of these forests have been badly denuded in the course of last 30 years and there is hardly any wildlife left outside the present game sanctuaries. Wildlife consists of Tigers, Leopards, Bears, Sambhar (*Cervus unicolor*), Cheetal (*Curvus arcus*), Neelgai (*Bosalaphus tragocamelus*), Fox (*Vulpes bengalensis*), Jackal (*Canis aureus*), Sloth Bear (*Melursus ursinus*), and the Bush Rat (*Golunda ellioti*).

The climate of the area is very similar to that of the Indo-Gangetic Plain, with hot dry summers and delightfully cold winters. Hadaoti receives on average of 35 inches (87.5 cm) of rainfall. Good rainfall has made this area the traditional grainary of Rajasthan and it also offers good pasturage in time of drought and famine for the livestock from the arid zones of Rajasthan.

Origin of Sacred Grove or Sacred Site

During the period of princely states, some uncultivated areas were reserved for use by king or feudal lords. The areas strictly meant for hunting and wood requirements of the kind were called *Kailara* and the area for sustaining the horses of feudal lords was called *Jord*. The remaining uncultivated area called *gaucher*, was open to grazing. With increasing pressure on land partly because of population, and livestock pressure and partly because of encroachment in common grazing land by the powerful individuals, carrying capacity of grazing land started deteriorating. Under these situations, isolating an area in the name of a deity or warrior evolved as a mechanism of arresting unsustainable ways of human exploitation. Sacred areas in the name of deities are appreciated by all caste groups as well as tribal groups. It is believed that the deity resides in these trees. The deity and departed souls are believed to enable livelihood in extreme environmental condition. Except for water, people believe that sacred area should not be used in any manner directly by the human beings. Indirect uses such as grazing should be undertaken only when there are no other options for sustaining the livestock.

Hadaoti has been the abode of early man, as is clearly evident from several well-preserved Upper-Paleolithic period cave paintings dating back to 20,000 B.C. Legends link it to the epic periods of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Scores of beautiful temples and countless treasures in sculptured stones are spread over miles in the wilderness. The Hindu epics are based on historical legends, myths and folklore. The *Ramayana* tells the story of King Dashrath's eldest son Rama, his exile due to his stepmother Kaikeyi who wanted the throne of Ayodhya for her own son, Bharat, the abduction of Ram's beautiful wife Sita by Lanka's King Ravana and Sita's rescue after a long war. Rama is the embodiment of all qualities of the perfect son, husband, brother and king. His faithful wife, Sita is the traditional role model of all India's women. His brother Lakshmana is the perfect self-sacrificing younger brother. The fearless monkey god, Hanuman, who helped Rama recover Sita from Ravana, is the perfect devotee, venerated throughout Rajasthan. Hanuman's statue guards the entrance to protect them from evil spirits, black magic and powerful enemies.

Legend: Sitabari is a small place situated at a distance of 1 km. from Kelwara and 39 kilometres from Shahbad, the head quarters of the eastern most Tehsil of the district Kota, (Now district Baran), as well as a Panchayat Smiti bearing the same name. It is situated in a picturesque dense forest. It (Sitabari) has a temple of Sage Balmiki, and a cluster of *Kunds* (Ponds). According to a legend prevalent in the village, Sitabari marks the place where Sita was left by Lakshmana in the forest at the behest of her husband Shri Rama at the time of her second banishment as her chastity was doubted by the people of Ayodhya. While she was being led through the Jungle one afternoon, Sita felt thirsty and asked Lakshmana to fetch water for her. Failing to find water he shot an arrow in the ground as a result of which a spring gushed forth from the bosom of the earth. In village Bahari, 12 kilometres from Sitabari, there is evidence of Lakshmana's arrow in the stone. The stream created by Lakshmana's arrow is known as "Lakshman Babhuka". He brought water for Sita in two cups made of *Dhak* (*Buteas frondosa*) leaves. When he reached the spot where he had

left Sita he found her asleep. He hung the leaf-cups to the branch of a tree under which Sita was resting and left the place to return to Ayodhya. Some time after Lakshmana had left her, an easterly wind spilled some water from the leaf-cups on the body of Sita. She woke up and found Lakshmana missing. She soon realised that she had been left alone in the forest under the orders of her husband. She erected a small hut with twigs and branches and settled down there. The place is even now known as "Sita Rasoda" (i.e. Kitchen). Later she is said to have shifted her residence to Balmiki Ashram (hermitage), and gave birth to her children. Legend says that here sage Balmiki made Kush, the Lav's younger brother from a grass (*Kush* → Dabh Kush). Pandit Bansi Lal and a local shop-keeper pointed out that the source of river 'Banganga' is in the 'Sitakuti', half a kilometre away from the Sitabari temples. It is believed that the river originates from this place and it flows towards the temples as a thin stream. There are four *Kunds* (ponds) filled with water from natural springs. These are Lakshmana, *Kund*, Suraj *Kund*, Sita *Kund* and Lav-Kush *Kund* and are believed to have great religious importance. Their water is considered sacred. Person excommunicated by their caste panchayats are asked to take a purificatory dip in these *Kunds*. The water of these *Kunds* is credited with medicinal value. It is said to cure person suffering from mental disorders. During summer the water of all the *Kunds* is cold whereas in winter it is warm. The *Kunds* never go dry. The water from these springs is ultimately drained in a small stream, which flows downwards towards north. Enroute various tributaries of varying magnitude coming from all direction join the Banganga. During rainy, season, it becomes formidable. People residing near the banks of the Banganga have constructed small bunds, anicuts on the river to irrigate their fields. However, any records in regard to these modes of irrigation and the total irrigated area are not available with the management as these are neither registered nor legal. The entire water from Sitabari is collected at Gardha 16 km, away where a reservoir has been constructed. Sugarcane and paddy are raised by irrigating the fields by its water. It is recorded in the Gazetteer of Kota, that Sitabari is a irriga-

tion tank, maintained by the Irrigation Department (Gazetteer of Kota, 1962), irrigating 1,421.96 hectares.

Temples and Kunds (Ponds) in Sitabari: Sitabari has a temple of sage Balmiki and a cluster of *Kunds* (Fig.1). Balmiki temple is one of the oldest temple constructed by Sahariya (Scheduled Tribe of the area) Samaj and is under the management of a Sahariya priest. Sitabari encompassing an area of 519 *Bighas* and 17 *Biswas* is surrounded by Reserved forest, pasture land, agricultural lands and the Mango tree plantations.

Lakshmana Kund: The biggest of the four *Kunds* but is only 1½ metre deep. Water can be seen flowing out of the rocks at various places. A few steps have been constructed on all sides to enable devotees to reach the water, and pilgrims take bath sitting on them. A spacious verandah running around this pool is used as a resting place. There are three gates, bigger one is "Lakshmana Darwaza", while other two opening on eastern and western side are smaller. On southern side of the *Kund*, an idol of Lakshmana, carrying water for Sita has been erected. The floor in front of the idol is paved with black and white marble tiles with silver coins struck in them. There is a wooden platform - Lakshman Ka-Takhat on one side of the idol where only Brahmin can sit. In front of it is a plant of *Tulsi* (Basil) surrounded by a marble platform. The pilgrims circumanbulate about the idol and the *Tulsi* Plant, at least once. Under the Champa (*Michalia champaca*), tree near the Lashmana Darwaza is an idol of Hanumanji. The stem of the tree is painted with orange-red ochre and is worshipped along with the idol as a symbol of Hanumanji. Members of all communities except Harijans can enter the temple and go near the idol and take a dip in the holy water. Harijans are not allowed to go very near to the idol.

Suraj Kund: This is comparatively smaller *Kund*, though water comes out from the ground in large quantities and the surplus overflows the *Kund*. Its water is clean and remains crystal clear inspite of the fact that so many people take bath in it. The platform around the *Kund* was paved in marble in Samvat 1972-74 (1915-17 A.D.) at a cost of Rs. 2294/- out of which Rs. 250/- was donated by the old Kota State and rest collected

by voluntary contribution. All around the *Kund*, verandas roofed by wire guaze have been constructed to prevent dry leaves from surrounding trees falling in to holy waters. In the right corner of the *Kund*, there is a natural *Shiv-linga* and an idol of Sun-god (Suray Narain) mounted on a horseback. Water of the *Kund* is considered as sacred as the Ganges water. All Sahariyas immerse the ashes of the dead relatives in the water that overflows from *Kund*. People of other Hindu communities who cannot afford to go to Haridwar for immersion of ashes of the dead ones in river Ganga, do the same here. Washing clothes or using soap in the *Kund* is prohibited. However, pilgrims can do so outside where a pucca reservoir has been built.

The remaining two *Kunds* are in dilapidated condition, as they have not been repaired for many years.

Balmiki Ashram (Hermitage): Just opposite the Sita *Kund* is the Balmiki Ashram. In the courtyard of the Ashram there are three strong stone slabs - two vertical and the third resting over them horizontally so as to form a cradle, called the cradle of Lav and Kush, the two sons of Sita who were born in the Ashram. It is a very quite place with many shady trees giving it, a serene look. The statutory Panchayat makes an income of Rs. 1,000/- by annual lease of land attached to the Ashram.

The water level in the Sitabari is very high. One can find water, just 5-6 feet below the ground. In the area outside Sitabari, the water table is 220-300-400 feet deep. Till 30 years back this area had thick forest and was teeming with wild life. The only priest of the Lakshmana *Kund* temple used to perform *Pooja* before 4 P.M. and went back to Kelwara as tigers and other animals used to come for drinking water at Sitabari. Unfortunately, these forest have been denuded. In September, 1974, 234 *Bighas* and 45 *Biswas* from Danta village and 126 *Bighas* and 12 *Biswas* of Chhichhorni village were denoted to the Sitabari temple. Thus total of 519 *Bighas* and 17 *Biswas* are noted in the records as the total land attached to the Sitabari Temples. Of these, 360 *Bighas* and 17 *Biswas* are forest and 158 *Bighas* and 17 *Biswas* are revenue land. Some of the important trees, shrubs and grasses available in these forests are:

Botanical Name	Local Name
<i>Basia latifolia</i>	Mahua
<i>Buchanania latifolia</i>	Achar
<i>Boswellia serrata</i>	Guggal, Halar/Salar
<i>Lannea coromandelica</i>	Gurjan
<i>Terminalia belerica</i>	Bahera
<i>Diospyros melanoxylon</i>	Tendu
<i>Terminalia arjuna</i>	Kora
<i>Albizia procera</i>	Sirish
<i>Eugenia jambolana</i>	Jamun
<i>Anogeissus latifolia</i>	Dhonkra
<i>Acacia leucophloea</i>	Khenjra
<i>Azadirachta indica</i>	Neem/Limbdo
<i>Salmalia malabarica</i>	Seemal
<i>Acacia nilotica</i>	Babool
<i>Ficus religiosa</i>	Peepal
<i>Ficus racemosa</i>	Umar
<i>Zizyphus jujuba</i>	Bor
<i>Butea monosperma</i>	Kesuda/Khakhro/Palash
<i>Mangifera indica</i>	Amba/Mango/Kairi
<i>Cassia auriculata</i>	Anwala
<i>Carrisa spinarum</i>	Karonda
<i>Asparagus adscendens</i>	Dholi Moosli
<i>Schima neriisiam</i>	Sen-senta

People's choices for the use/non-use values of natural resources is linked to their beliefs. A variety of natural objects are regarded sacred by Hindus. Plants like *Peepal*, *Neem*, *Mango*, *Imli* and *Champa* (*Michalia champaca*) are considered sacred, *Neem* is valued specifically for its air purificatory and medicinal values. It is believed that gods, residing in these trees are able to prevent as well as cure diseases. Souls residing in *Champa* and *Peepal* are believed to be generous and people pray to these species for satisfaction of their needs. *Peepal* is also considered to be a tree of enlightenment.

Resources Users: Shahbad Tehsil, where Sitabari is situated is a problem Tehsil. It is predominantly populated by Scheduled Tribe Sahariya living in abject circumstances controlled by vested interests. Masses in general and the Sahariya in particular suffered for long under great disabilities. Even after Independence in 1947, the consequential integration of the princely states in the region and the guarantee of equality gave them little protection from economic exploitation. Sahariya are most backward and the poorest of the Scheduled Tribes of Rajasthan. They were bought and sold like chattel till half a century ago. They knew no settled life and practised shifting cultivation with primitive techniques and earned the main part of their subsistence by collecting and selling forest

produce. The forest activities of the Sahariyas are confined to the *Katha* (Catechu) manufacture and collection to honey, gum, *Moosli*, *Chironji* and *Tendu* leaves. *Katha* (Catechu) is manufactured out of 'Kher' (Acacia catechu) trees which abound in this area; and the Sahariyas are expert in *Katha* making. Till a few years ago forest coupes for *Katha* manufacture used to be taken over by the Bohra contractors who monopolised the industry. The Sahariyas were paid low wages and received beastly treatment from the agents of the contractors. The Adim Jati Sewak Sangh and other Development agencies organised the Sahariyas and other tribals into Forest Produce Co-operative Societies with the right of securing contracts on concessions rates without bidding; and the amount of royalty was fixed by the Forest Department on consultation with the Co-operative Department. Even this has not improved the economic condition of poor Sahariya, as they feel that the place of contractor has been taken by some one else. Collection of gum (adhesive substance secreted by many forest trees) is another activity of Sahariyas. In most cases it exudes naturally but some times out of incision made by collectors.

Maize, *Jowar* and some inferior millets like *Kodon*, *Rali* and *Sama* constitute the staple food of the Sahariyas. The still poor Sahariyas eat wild seeds which they supplement with herbs and tubers. The most common roots and tubers eaten are *Gawari*, *Chayin* and *Bajar*, which are found in the area in large quantities. These has an extremely intoxicating effect. Little fruit is eaten by the Sahariyas. During the season they eat *Tendu*, *Jamun Achar*, *Singaras* and *Mangoes*. Sahariyas are fond of drinks, which they make from *Mahua* flowers and barks of some wild herbs. The process of illicit distillation followed by the Sahariyas is easy and cheap. The apparatus is simple, and, if perchance the operations is detected, can easily be hidden or dismantled.

Religious life of Sahariyas mainly centres around their relationship with supernatural forces whose natural abodes are in forest. Due to this, the Sahariyas would not like to destroy the natural forest environment because most of their deities stay there. The religious belief of the Sahariyas and their ritual practises recognise host of non human spirits, that inhabit certain place

in the forest and the other, on veneration of ancestors, who are supposed to be controlling many activities of the living even after death. Sahariyas main aim in life is to keep appeased both these forces by worship and performance of rituals as well as by avoidance of actions which might offend these supernatural powers. Destruction of forest around them is one such action which will offend the supernatural forces. To keep supernatural and ancestral forces appeased, indiscriminate cutting is not practiced. The *Peepal* (*Ficus religiosa*) and *Kher* trees are religiously significant, the former being so highly venerated that is not felled or cut for using as fuel. Its twigs are, however, collected for making sacred fire which is lighted at the time of marriage, death etc. The Sahariya call the *Kher* trees as *Kher Baba* and offer worship to it. Even *Katha* manufacturing is governed by set of rules laid down by the Government, and the contractors are prohibited from cutting down trees with trunks less than 30 cm in diameter. Trees which are red from inside are considered suitable for *Katha* making. The test is carried out by making a cleft in the stem with an axe or gimlet. Only one stroke is permissible. Strict laws and taboos exist against cutting trees above and around the shrines. The Sahariya shrines consist simply of a pointed stone or earthenware plaque bearing the figures, in a relief, of a deity and honoured with a flimsy roof of flag sticks. Trees above these or nearby are never cut. However forest play a major role in supplying a variety of non-wood produce of subsistence value to local communities.

The Sahariya believe that a host of ghost or malevolent spirits inhabit the village and surrounding forests. Their fear tends to prevent people from going to forest at night. It is believed that the ghosts wander in the air. However, certain trees are their domain. Their favourite trees are '*Peepal*' (*Ficus religiosa*) '*Bad*' or '*Bor*' (*Zizyphus jujuba*) and '*Ambo*' (*Mangifera indica*). If a particular tree is recognised as the abode of a ghost, a piece of flat stone is kept underneath the tree which represents the image of same, such trees are never harmed.

On account of their environmental situation, virtually all the material needs of the people are limited to the resources made available by the

natural environment. Apart from fulfilling two basic needs food and shelter, the forest supply a variety of non-wood produce of substance value to local communities. Forest fulfill their economic and socio-religious needs. Though they are exposed to modern technology and material culture, their own culture and technology has not changed much. The forest economy of Sahariyas and their methods of exploitation, which serve their immediate needs and their religious background with their beliefs and rituals safe guard the interest of wider society in the forest.

Apart from Sahariya tribals, there are other castes and communities which are backward but are not listed as either Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes. Their main occupation is cattle rearing (Ahirs and Gujjars). They are inhabiting tribal as well as non-tribal villages.

Among the caste Hindus, agriculturalist castes like Kirad, Dhakar, Nagad, appear to be dominant communities followed by Brahmin, Banias etc. Among the Muslim population both Momins and Bohras are residing in the area. A good number of caste groups are represented in the area, though all of them are not Scheduled Castes. Scheduled Castes are generally settled in villages where high caste Hindus or Momins are found.

Economic Importance of The Forest

The main types of trees in this area seems to be valued more for its food, fodder, fuel, medicinal and shade value than for any religious sentiments. For example *Anogeissus pendula* (Dhao, Dhuwali) seems to be valued for its medicinal, construction qualities and as fuelwood. It is cut because it is good fuelwood, it burns well even when green. *Butea monosperma* is considered the best timber for tribal shelters. Thick mat of *Butea monasprema* leaves covers the 5-6 feet or more long pillars of *Bunglaw* of Sahariya villages. *Bunglaw* is an important feature of Sahariya villages. Shelter of Kathodia, Bhil and Garasia tribals are made of screens of large leaves and frame work of branches of *B. monosperma*. Cups and eating vessels are made from levels of *B. monosperma* by tribals. It is also cut for its medicinal value. Stem bark of *B. monosperma* is scrubbed over affected areas as an antidote to itching by Bhils; its seeds are administered orally for intestinal worms by Bhils.

Its leaves are taken for Guinea worm by Bhils; fruits of *B. monosperma* after pounding are tied hot locally in case of sprain and fractures by Kathodias. *B. monosperma* is a flowering plant and is called the flame of the forest. The flowering orange to red flowers are important means of adornment. Root bark is used in liquor preparation by Bhils, Umbrellar structures made of fresh leaves are used by Sahariya in scorching summer sun and down pouring rains. Baskets, umbrella and hats of leaves are made by tribals. Leaves are rolled and folded to form circular cushions (*Aduni*) over which the tribal women place their burden, whether water pots or stacks of fuel wood. During journey or otherwise a thirsty tribal plucks a fresh leaf and folds it in a funnel shaped conical cup called *Padiya* which is dipped in water or water hole.

Likewise *Diospyros melanoxylon* (Tendu), astringent, pleasant tasting fruits are cherished by all the tribals offering them respite in the hot summer days. Collected and stored in large quantities in storage bins as it is important food in famine. In the lean months when food supplies are low, the dried fruits are boiled and consumed. It is used in construction of shelters, fencing and other household goods like pitcher stand (*Pardini*), cups and glasses (*Doondle*). Two or more leaves are sewn with a circular wood clips to make broad cups in which liquid food can be served. Collection of Tendu leaves for *Biri* (local cigarette) wrappers, offer labour opportunities to the tribal. Extract of stem bark mixed with another root bark is taken orally for malaria by Kathodia tribals. Stem bark paste mixed with oil is used as an ointment for wounds by Bhils. One or two seeds of kernel are taken orally for dysentery by Bhil and Damor tribals.

Fresh ripe fruits of *Sterculia urens* (Kandyas, Kandols) are eaten by tribal; its leaves are crushed in to paste to be used as an ointment for chapped/cracked skin in winter by Bhils; the gum of these tree are collected. Overtapping and subsequent injury is responsible for the fate of these trees. The disappearance of *Sterculia urens* is general throughout the region.

Flowers of *Cassia fistula* (Bahania, Dhedlya) are cooked as vegetable, and used for adornment. These trees are valued for their shade during sunning afternoons and provide sleeping retreat

to lovers at night. Pods of *Cassia fistula* are placed under the pillow while sleeping to stop nightmares.

Boswellia serrata (Salar, Halar) an auspicious tree is valued for its gum and wood. Trunks are used for construction, of household things like *Pandini*, *Parota* (troughs) for kneading flour by Bhils; for making 'Kachcha bunds' (dams) in association with stones; and for making *Toran* (Mandap or marriage bower). In tribal marriage, a feature of paramount importance is the construction of an auspicious wooden structure under which the marriage rites commence. Either gum or the vegetable oil of *B. serrata* is used as incense or for lighting lamps by tribals. Wooden effigies for religious purposes are made of this wood.

Mahua (*Basia latifolia*) flowers are used for liquor and from its seeds oil is extracted. The fruits of *Buchanania latifolia* (Achar) are highly nutritious. *Acacia catechu* (kher) and Dhonkari yield gum of a high quality. *Katha* (Catechu) is made out of kher tree. Dry wood from *Anogeissus latifolia* (Dhonkra) as well as from some others trees is used as fuel and in the construction of houses and wells. *Terminalia bellerica* (Bahera), *Cassia auriculata* (Anwala), *Solanum nigrum* (Makoy) and *Nyctanthes arboritristis* (Harshingar) are used for medicinal purposes. The white *Moosli*, which is a root tuber credited with masculinity giving potency is highly valued. *Sen-Senta* and *Gharinia* grasses are used for making strings, cords and ropes used for various purposes.

Consumptive and non-consumptive uses of natural resources are interdependent concern of the traditional societies. There are limits of utilization of natural resources in a subsistence economy. Limited collection of medicinal plants, deadwood and fuel wood are sanctioned by the community laws. However, with increasing needs of the growing population, leniency has crept in and people are extracting resources unproportionately. Uncontrolled grazing and over exploitation of resources and diversion of land for construction activities have resulted in dilapidated status of the forest.

Sitabari Fair

A fair of religious importance, is held from

Baisakh Sudi Punam to *Jeth Badi Amavas* at Sitabari. The management of the fair, which was being looked after by state so far has now been entrusted to the 'Sitabari Mela Committee'. The Chairman of the committee is the SDO Shahbad and Tehsildar, Naib Tehsildar, Kelwara are the other principal functionaries. It is under the committee's supervision that the *Mela* (fair) is organised and the collections audited. The income from the *mela* including offerings are utilized for the maintenance of the area. The records of *Mela* committee and any other transactions, permission (regarding picnics etc.) and/or any other illegal activities like felling of trees or any other encroachments are kept in the Kelwara tehsil office. The fair is at its peak on *Chandra Amavas Padwa* and *Dooj*. More than 50,000 persons form villages in the Kota-district and the neighbouring areas of Madhya Pradesh congregate at the fair. Thousands of persons come to Sitabari for a holy dip in the *Kunds*, which are considered as holy as the Ganges. People also visit Sitabari on Mondays falling on *Amavas* and on the day of the solar eclipse. All castes, communities and scheduled tribes participate in the fair, particularly Sahariya tribals, join the fair in large numbers and pay respect to Lakshmana and Sita. A large number of Vaishnavites come here to pay regards and worship the idols and bath in the holy *Kunds*.

Apart from its religious importance the fair is of great economic significance. A large number of traders are attracted to Sitabari at the time of the fair and transactions amounting to a lakh rupees take place. The shopkeepers come from Delhi and Mathura. About 500 stalls are set up on both sides of the road. They sell varieties of goods required by the visitors. This fair provides an opportunity to the breeders for selling their animals. The animals are brought from Jhalawar, Eklara, Bundi, Kota, Gurah, Bhilwara and Nagaur.

Fair is also a place for recreation and amusement. Though, most of the people are busy with their religious observances but children who are looking for amusement, enjoy religious shows presented by touring companies. Groups of acrobats come from Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. The Directorate of Public Relations (Rajasthan) sends its publicity van to screen films

of educative values. The other departments also arrange exhibition of different phases of development programmes executed by them. Sahariya who throng to the fair can be seen singing and dancing. The fair offers break in the monotonous life of the rural people of the area.

Sites for shops are allotted by Panchayat of Kelwara which charges nominal rent from the shopkeeper. The rent varies according to the width of the shop. The Committee charges fair tax at the rate of 1½ per cent of the sale-price of the animal. The circus and dramatic companies have to pay a consolidated amount for the duration. A part of this income is spent for the maintenance of the temple and making improvements wherever needed. It planted 500 Mango trees and Jamun trees in 1958. The annual expenditure incurred in looking after those plants is Rs. 400/-. Repairs to the boundary walls and streams is also carried out by the committee.

Traditionally, the tribal communities in the area were working on community based decision making in prescribing norms of behaviour in relation to the members of the community. However, these tribals are no longer self sufficient, nor are they in full control of their own resource base, so there is a little of firm community control. The cultures, regions of these tribal communities have also changed substantially because of contact with large scale societies. These changes have by and large, tended to erode the self-organised system of conservation, the system of sacred sites.

The continuance of conservation system would eventually be affected by the relative levels of benefits and costs perceived by local communities. For a variety of reasons these benefits have substantially depreciated in the perceptions of people with access to sacred sites and their resources. Modern technological developments have brought changes in resource use practices of local communities, as well as brought to them other sources of income and market facilities thus making them less dependent on local resources.

After Independence (1947), with the enforcement of the Ceiling Act by the then Government, this became the property of the Forest Department, coupled with increasing livestock pressure and population pressure, the decimation of the forest began. There was absolutely no restric-

tion on felling trees for firewood, and timber.

Today, the trees are mostly old, new plantation is almost nil, except plantation of 8000 plants in 12 hectares in 1997 by Forest Department near Lakshmana Kund. A Sikh Guru Dev Singh planted around 200-300 Mango trees near Mela ground. It is believed by people that the mangoes of these trees if taken out of Sitabari for selling or any other purpose, they became uneatable. Otherwise people can eat as much as they like free of charge. As per records, these temples were without tree cover, in 1974, forest area of Chhichharni and Dauta villages were attached to Sitabari.

Traditionally, cutting wood from trees in the area was taboo. It was believed this wood can only be used for cremation so it was not auspicious to cut these trees. People believed that if some body will cut this wood, there will be a death in the family. Cutting of dry and old tree is common now-a-days, even Sahariya for whom this place is of utmost importance, follow the practice of cutting trees for selling in Kelwara market.

The communities in the area are in conflicts regarding the usage of resources from the area. There are traditional agriculturalist caste groups, pastoralist groups and food gatherer groups. The traditional agriculturalists groups (Kirad, Dhakar, Nagar), rear cow and buffaloes due to socio-religio-economic reason. The pastoralists (Ahirs, Gujjars) rear sheep and goat due to traditional and economic reason. The scheduled tribals like Sahariya who used to practice shifting cultivation earned main part of their subsistence by collecting and selling forest produce. Grazing by sheep and goat leave no vegetation for the cows and buffaloes. Forest is important to all of them but serve different goals.

As already mentioned in Rajasthan, the sacred groves are known by different names, but during field work it was noticed that communities in this area are not familiar with it. People's knowledge of sacred groves or biodiversity of their area was poor. Therefore with practically no sacred groves attached to temple the concept of sacred grove is almost lost in Sitabari. Plants recorded around the temple complex of Sitabari include horticultural and ornamental species.

The veneration of sacred sites tend to be a

function of local generally non-Brahman, priesthood, (The oldest temple of Balmiki is Sitabari is still looked after by a Sahariya priest). As small scale societies come in contact with the larger society, the Brahman priesthood is replacing the non-Brahman priesthood and with that the tradition of respecting and protecting sacred sites. Traditionally the protection to sacred sites was maintained by belief in omniscience and powers of local deities complemented by enforcement of the deity's will by priests and local leaders of local community. Just as the social organisation has broken down, so has the faith in omniscience and power of deities.

The traditional social organisation persisted till 1950's. Over the last 40 years it has generally given way to more centralized state machinery with the little or no scope for arrangements reflecting collective choice by local communities. When British took over forest administration, their policies were for reserving forests. After independence, the forest land came under the control of the government. The state appropriation of the forest resources has been at the cost of the common property rights of the forest dwellers. Singh (1986) points out, that common property rights of the local inhabitants had not been recognised either in the British formulation of the forest policy of 1865, or the Indian Forest Act of 1927. The notion of common property is applicable to the economy of the region and includes the collection of wood, grass, weeds, leaves, cowdung, berries, fruit, bark, also common grazing lands and water for drinking purposes and for cattle. It has been impossible to ensure the welfare of the locals sharing common property resources because of the governments failure in legitimising common property claims. In the pursuit of so-called wider national interest, the government by contracting the forests to industrial firms, has aided the privatisation of these resources with the benefits occurring to the urban rich who use the finished product. The direct forest produce which was previously freely available to local people, as a consequence of privatisation of forest, has to be bought back from the state. Gathering and collecting are everyday feature of the Sahariya economy. For Sahariya Sitabari is of great importance, but even they are cutting trees sur-

rounding this place, forgetting about the wrath of gods and spirits. They are cutting the trees for selling in Kelwara market. Sahariyas are burning tree for gum as well. Burning of old tree trunks from inside and cutting of tree branches for fuel has become a common practice. Muslim residing in the area do not believe in the restriction on cutting trees around the sacred site. Lack of new plantation in the area has further deteriorated the situation. Uncontrolled grazing, over exploitation of resources and diversion of land for construction activities have resulted in the dilapidated forest cover. As the area of Sitabari is under the state administration, the same cannot be maintained by local communities.

However, there are still people who are concerned over the erosion of the self organized conservation system, that deny the legitimacy of community control over land and water resources. Local people cannot take any legal action against the violators as the area is under control of government and not of local community. So if some initiative starts from local people towards conservation of the site, they cannot legally enforce it. The centralized bureaucratic procedure pertaining to the management of natural resources are rigid and insensitive to particular local context. They are also unsympathetic to local tradition, including these of sacred sites.

Sitabari is a place of great socio-religious importance to Sahariyas. Sitabari served as a rallying point for a Sahariya rights movements. All community level meetings of Sahariyas are held in the Balmiki Ashram. An old Sahariya told, about a gathering which was called by the government official at Sitabari to announce their freedom from bonded labour. Till few years back, marriages were being arranged at Sitabari. Apart from satisfying their religious needs, this place serve as a meeting place (public/official), camping ground and a picnic spot.

To ensure its survival management authorities must be approached to review the policies of giving contract of extracting drywood to outsiders. It has been reported that while doing so, the contractors cut truckloads of green trees as well. Similar restrictions must be put on water theft as using it for irrigation which is meant only for plants of Sitabari.

A long term strategy for sustainable development needs to be adopted by local and district administration to meet needs of local, communities, who depend on forest for most of their needs. Urgent measures must be taken to ensure natural regenerations, new plantation of trees to be added seasonally and revival of religious feelings among younger generation who seem to be averse to the old traditional values of harmonious living with nature.

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