

Drops of Nature Conservation - Sacred Groves

Prabhakar Joshi and Yogesh Shrivastava

INTRODUCTION

The practice of leaving a pocket of vegetation alongwith the fauna harboured at a site slightly away from a village dedicated to a deity since the ancient past and preserved todate on religious sentiment is common not only in various parts of India but in other countries as well. Such pockets, known as "sacred groves" have been reported from Ghana, Nigeria, Syria and Turkey. Surprisingly in the New World we find their conspicuous absence. We come across their reference in the ancient Greek and Sanskrit texts.

In the Indian sub-continent plant scientists have brought to light the sacred groves of western Ghats especially in Maharashtra and Goa (Over 233 groves reported alongwith the associated deities: Vartak and Gadgil, 1973, 1981; Gadgil and Vartak, 1975, 1976, 1981). Roughly five to ten thousand hectares of virgin forest area is estimated to form the groves of this region. Studies are going on presently on the entire length of Western Ghats including Karnataka and Kerala. The groves of Coorg district of the former have been well studied (Cobras are generally the associated deity). Interestingly, the groves of Sarguja district (Madhya Pradesh) in the vicinity of most tribal villages are of an area of 20 hectares or more. Hajra (1974, 1981) has worked on the Mawphlong and Sorarim groves near Shillong (Meghalaya) and also thrown light on the folk beliefs and taboos associated. One comes across groves in the tribal areas on the Aravalli ranges and also in the desert area of State of Rajasthan with the same sentiments conserved todate. We see in India groves harbouring a considerable biodiversity. They are known by different names such as Dev-Rais or Dev-Rahati (Maharashtra), Devarkadus (Karnataka), Maalvan (Aravalli) and Orann or Banni (the Thar desert).

The sacred groves can be aptly called as traditionally preserved indigenous "sanctuar-

ies" of the tribals (and rural folks) where both flora and fauna have received absolute protection with of the deep reverence and religious faith in the associated deity. They are characterised by a more or less climax vegetation untampered largely, even today by man and biotic influence. The trees and lianas in the groves acquire gigantic proportions not found in the surrounding forests. Often they are the only patches of luxuriant greenery in an otherwise desolate terrain. They are the last refuge of species endangered or having disappeared from the region including fauna (especially primates). A preponderance of climbers and epiphytes has been seen and by their richer biodiversity they form excellent entities for study by naturalists.

In most places picking fallen branches, fruits and even leaf litter from the grove is tabooed. In the past they have served as sites of primitive cults and rites and even animal and human sacrifice. Partially due to reverential sentiments and mostly out of fear of the wrath of the deity the groves have received immunity from destructive forces. They are shrouded with mystic folk lores and legends and such blasphemous acts are either few or altogether unheard of.

METHODOLOGY

The authors are engaged with ethnobiological studies on the tribal and rural population of Rajasthan. By field work in these areas they are documenting the fast disappearing oral heritage among these people on their interrelationship with the ambient flora and fauna surrounding them. Information is being gathered on various facets of tribal and rural lives involving the biological environment. Preliminary studies have been carried out on some sacred groves also. The authors plan to take up detailed studies on these groves in the near future in an organised and systematic way on lines spelled out in this paper.

SCENARIO OF CONSERVATION OF SACRED GROVES AND INDIVIDUAL PLANTS IN RAJASTHAN

I. Sacred Groves in Tribal Areas—"MAAL VANS"

Usually there is a green spot reserved in most tribal areas in Rajasthan, in the premises of which a deity is housed. This supports a grove of magnificent trees that achieve great heights and are very old. The grove is called a "Maalvan". The "Maalvan" is dedicated to a deity, usually Lord Mahadeo or the God of the hills.

As mentioned the plants of the groves are strictly protected and harming them is considered a blasphemous act punishable by the deity. Cases of a tribal chopping his hands out of fear of the wrath of the deity after lopping or cutting a tree from a grove are not unheard of, if not common. So great is the religious faith.

An aura of mystery laden myths surround the groves. Tales of the deity transforming to a venomous snake or a furious tiger to kill a violator, are many. Sometimes, miraculous powers are ascribed to the deity and the grove. At Paoti Koda (Dungarpur district) is a grove where a child fell from a height of fifty feet in very shallow waters flowing over rocks and was unharmed. The place attained great fame after this. Coconuts, other offerings, flags hoisted on bamboo; clay terracottas etc. are offered in these spots by worshippers. In front of the shrine, leaves of *Mangifera indica* L. and *Syzygium cumini* (L.) Skeels are laciniately tied.

Some examples of sacred groves together with the plant species representing them are given here:

(A) Groves of Bhils

- (1) *Paoti Koda* (Wer forest block, Dungarpur distt.)

Dedicated to Dalji Bhagat- a saint.

Trees: *Terminalia arjuna* (Roxb.) W. et A. and *Terminalia bellirica* (Gaertn.) Roxb.; *Lannea coromandelica* (Houtt.) Merr. and *Sterculia urens* Roxb. in lesser numbers.

- (2) *Boreshwar* (Aspur tehsil, Dungarpur distt.)

Dedicated to Lord Mahadeo.

Trees: *Aegle marmelos* (L.) Corr., *Diospyros*

melanoxylon Roxb., *Ficus hispida* L.f., *Ficus religiosa* L. (growing on *Phoenix sylvestris* (L.) (Roxb.)), *Haldina cordifolia* Ridsd., *Holoptelia integrifolia* (Roxb.) Planch., *Lannea coromandelica*; *Madhuca longifolia* (Koen.) Macbr. var. *latifolia* (Roxb.) Chev., *Millettia tomentosa* (Roxb.) Sinclair, *Mitragyna parvifolia* (Roxb.) Korth., *Pandanus odoratissimus* L.f. and *Terminalia arjuna*.

- (3) *Maalvan at Rangela* (Dungarpur distt.)

Trees: *Diospyros melanoxylon*, *Mitragyna parvifolia*, *Tectona grandis* L.f. (in gregarious stands) and *Terminalia bellirica*.

- (4) *Maalvan at Charwara* (Dungarpur distt.)

About twenty trees of: *Ficus religiosa*, *Jasminum sambac* (L.) Ait., *Mitragyna parvifolia* and *Terminalia tomentosa* Cooke.

(B) Garasia Groves

- (1) *Bosa village* (Abu Road tehsil, Sirohi distt.)

Dedicated to Maad Bavasi (also Bhakar Bavasi or god of the hills).
Trees: *Acacia catechu* Willd., *Acacia ferruginea* DC., *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss. and *Salmaia malabarica* (DC.) Schoot. et Endl.

- (2) *Village Jamburi-major shrine* (Abu Road tehsil, Sirohi distt.)

Dedicated to Bhakar Bavasi.

Trees: *Anogeissus latifolia* (Roxb.) Wall. ex. Bedd., *Capparis grandis* L.f., *Cassia fistula* L., *Mitragyna parvifolia* and *Sterculia urens*.

- (3) *Village Jamburi - minor shrine* (Abu Road tehsil, Sirohi district)

Dedicated to Bhakar Bavasi.

Trees: *Diospyros melanoxylon* and *Terminalia bellirica*.

Besides, mini-groves of bamboo (*Dendrocalamus strictus* Nees) flanking *Ficus* spp. sheltering deities are a common sight. The bamboo clumps growing in these groves are old and very tall.

II. Groves in Rural Areas (Oranns Or Bannis)

Sacred groves are seen in rural areas also of Rajasthan. These are usually dedicated to Lord Hanuman, Bheru or Guggaji, Jogmaya, other gods and goddesses and ancestral deities.

Some sacred groves were studied in

Jhunjhunu district viz., near Jhunjhunu town, Chirawa and Udaipur wati. The most common species occurring in them were *Anogeissus rotundifolia* Blatt. et Haub. (less frequent stands of scores of specimens); *Azadirachta indica*, *Capparis decidua* (Forsk.) Edgew., *Ficus benghalensis* L., *Ficus religiosa*, *Maytenus emarginatus* (Willd.) Ding. Hou., *Prosopis cineraria* (L.) Druce, *Salvadora oleoides* Decne. and *Salvadora persica* L.

Some of the "Oranns" comprise exclusive stands of *Prosopis cineraria*, e.g. those near most to Vishnoi villages in Jodhpur district. The grove of Shakambari temple (adjacent to Sambhar Lake) is made up of *Acacia senegal* (L.) Willd. trees. *Anogeissus rotundifolia* outside the Oranns is rarely seen or not at all.

CONSERVATION OF INDIVIDUAL SPECIES A NOTE

1. *Adansonia digitata* L.

Called "Kalpavriksha" or "Kalpadev", it is believed that the tree has wish fulfilling powers and specimens of this tree in Mangliawas (near Ajmer City), Udaipur and near Banswara town are preserved since ages.

2. *Aegle marmelos*

This tree is considered to be dear to Lord Shiva to whom its leaves are offered. It is never cut.

3. *Azadirachta indica*

The tree is worshipped and considered auspicious. Many a times deities are housed below this tree.

4. *Ficus benghalensis*

The tree is worshipped not only in the tribal but non-tribal societies as well.

5. *Ficus religiosa*

(as in case of *F. benghalensis*).

6. *Madhuca longifolia* var. *latifolia*

On account of its extreme utility- yielding much cherished edible flowers and fruits, oil and above all their favourite liquor. It is considered

by the tribals as their dearest friend in the plant kingdom and rarely subjected to fell. Though yielding good, durable timber only the chief of village has the privilege of exploiting it for construction. Quarrels and disputes regarding ownership or violation may even lead to unrepented murder.

7. *Prosopis cineraria*

"Khejri" or "Jaanti" is considered to be even equivalent to sacred basil (*Ocimum sanctum* L.) in sacred nature. The genesis of the chipko-movement lay in village Khejadli, where in 1787, no's 363 Vishnois met martyrdom while attempting to protect the trees from felling by the ruler's men. It is worshipped on special days, marriages and other occasions.

All these trees receive patronage of the common man and are normally not lopped or cut for any need however dire it may be.

Thus are some individual plants conserved in Rajasthan.

DISCUSSION

As in other areas of the country the sacred groves on Rajasthan are not very large but as far as the biodiversity and the quality of the preserved specimens are concerned they rank with them at par. In the studies conducted so far, species having locally disappeared have been sighted in them e.g. *Acacia ferruginea* and *Capparis grandis* in Sirohi district and *Anogeissus rotundifolia* in the arid and semi-arid areas, further studies are likely to reveal more. In the groves- unchanged and untampered since ages we can find specimens with genetic variability with those occurring around (a concept that can be scientifically exploited). They are the true indicators of past vegetation- facts that can be taken care of in-future afforestation programmes.

The continued conservation of the groves is not only desirable for their aesthetic values but above that for their practical significance as harbingers of the extant biodiversity. Further, strategies should not only pay emphasis on the preservation and conservation of their existing structures but also their perpetuation and growth. Organization such as the IUCN, the MAB and the

WWF have an important role to play in conjunction with the Department of Environment and forest and its machinery countrywide.

The danger to the existing groves is not so much from the local inhabitants as it is from the claws of rapid urbanization and infiltration of urban mercenaries into these areas and also partially due to acculturation influences. It is true that religious sentiments day by day in the shadow of these factors is on the wane. It would be pertinent to cite the example of the fate of the excellent Boreshwar grove (Dungarpur district, Rajasthan) which has been seriously affected by the workers of the nearby soapstone quarry.

It is necessary to assess the various pressures on the sacred groves of Rajasthan and work out strategies for salvaging them from such forces through an involvement of the tribal communities and government machinery.

It is pertinent in this direction to undertake:

- Census of the groves in Rajasthan- their geographical location, size, associated deities; myths and legends including plant and animal species.
- Studies on the existing biodiversity in the individual grove including plant and animal species.
- A search for the ethnobiology of the species found in groves from the tribal inhabitants in vicinity.
- Identification of the relic species in the groves and identification of factors that have led to their rarity or extinction from the surrounding region.
- Studies on the reproductive biology of the threatened species (*viz.* pollination, dispersal of propagules, germination etc. *in situ* and *ex situ*).
- A search for remedial measures for ensuring the biodiversity of the groves and surrounding habitats.

KEY WORDS Plant Conservation. Tribal. Rural Folks. Rajasthan.

ABSTRACT Much is said about the exploitation of plant wealth by man and heavy pressure on the same by animals. However, though insignificant, there are instances where certain plants or patches of vegetation are not only not exploited but it is tabooed to break even a twig. These of course are usually linked with religious sentiments. Certain species of sacred nature, plants associated with temples or shrines and sacred groves associated with deities or saints in tribal and rural societies are almost immune to destruction. This communication endeavours to examine the situation of plant conservation by tribal and rural folks in Rajasthan.

REFERENCES

- Gadgil, Madhav and Vartak V.D.: Sacred groves of India- A plea of the continuous conservation. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.*, **72** (2): 314-320 (1975).
- Gadgil, Madhav and Vartak V.D.: Sacred groves of western India. *Econ. Bot.*, **30** (2): 152-160 (1976).
- Gadgil, Madhav and Vartak V.D.: Sacred groves of Maharashtra: An inventory. In: *Glimpses of Indian Ethnobotany*: S.K. Jain (Ed.), Oxford and I.B.H. Publishing Co. Ltd., New Delhi pp. 279-294 (1981).
- Hajra, P.K.: *Law- Lyngdoh Sacred Grove, Mawphlang* (Visitors guide), Shillong (1974).
- Hajra, P.K.: Nature conservation in Khasi folk beliefs and taboos. In: *Glimpses of Indian Ethnobotany*. S.K. Jain (Ed.), Oxford and I.B.H. Publishing Co. Ltd., New Delhi pp. 149-152 (1981).
- Vartak, V.D. and Gadgil Madhav.: Dev-Rahatis: An ethnobotanical study of the tracts of forest preserved on grounds of religious beliefs. *Proc. Indian Sci. Cong.*, **60** : 341 (Abstract) (1973).
- Vartak, V.D. and Gadgil M.: Studies on Sacred Groves along the western Ghats from Maharashtra to Goa : Role of beliefs and folk lore. In: *Glimpses of Indian Ethnobotany*. S.K. Jain (Ed.), Oxford and IBH Publishing Co. Ltd., New Delhi pp. 272-278 (1981).

Authors' Address: Prabhakar Joshi, Tropical Botanic Garden & Research Institute, Trivandrum 695 562, Kerala, India
Yogesh Shrivastava, Department of Botany, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur 302 004, Rajasthan, India