

Traditional Society and Bio-cultural Values in the Western Himalayas

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KEY WORDS Traditional knowledge; sacred groves; socio-cultural values; bio-diversity conservation; informal committee.

ABSTRACT Existence of an age-old tradition of preserving the forests on the ground of cultural and religious beliefs has become imperative not only for bio-diversity conservation but also for overall sustainability of the traditional societies existing in Kullu district of western Himalayas. Existence of sacred ecosystems has shown potential for conservation of bio-diversity. However, it is unfortunate that the so-called environment planners view local communities as primary threat to bio-diversity conservation. In recent times, indigenous socio-cultural practices are under constant threat due to the introduction of various western models of resource conservation. It is felt that there is an urgent need to initiate action-oriented resource management programmes involving the indigenous knowledge systems. This will help us to conserve our natural resources in a better way.

INTRODUCTION

The conservation of the bio-diversity has been a matter of serious concern all over the world (Reid and Miller, 1989; McNeely, *et al.*, 1990; Ramakrishnan, 1992; Gadgil, 1992). The emphasis on traditional method of bio-diversity conservation and management has currently been paid much attention (Berkes and Folke, 1992; Gadgil *et al.*, 1993; Davis and Wali, 1994; Singh *et al.*, 1996). Conserving India's rich bio-diversity has recently become a challenging task to different institutions. Traditional methods of conserving resources and socio-cultural integrity have been in existence in different parts of this country since time immemorial (Gadgil, 1991; Khiewtam and Ramakrishnan, 1989; Ramakrishnan, 1996; Singh *et al.*, 1996, 1997). Indigenous knowledge based preservation of patches of forest as "sacred groves" on the ground of religious beliefs has recently become imperative to ensure the overall livelihood of the local people. These sacred groves indeed not only reflect our rich cultural heritage but

also immensely play an invaluable role in conserving the bio-diversity. Against the backdrop, this paper analyzes some of the indigenous socio-religious practices of resource conservation by some local communities in the Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh.

OCCURRENCE OF SACRED GROVES

The existence of sacred groves has, in fact, been widely reported from many pockets of Europe, Asia and Africa (Frazer, 1980; Hughes and Swan, 1986; Hughes, 1996). In India, existence of sacred groves has been reported from Cherrapunji and adjoining areas (Khiewtam and Ramakrishnan, 1989), Meghalaya (Rodgers, 1994), Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra (Gadgil and Vartak, 1976), Andhra Pradesh (Rao, 1996), Karnataka (Kalam, 1996), Kerala (Induchoodan, 1992), Haryana (Anonymous, 1995), Pune (Roy Burman, 1992), Rajasthan (Singh, 1997; Singh and Saxena, 1998) and Himachal Pradesh (Singh, 1997a,b).

THE STUDY AREA

Kullu district is located in the heart of the Himachal Pradesh, which is lying in the western part of the Indian Himalayas. It is popularly known as Valley of Gods (Singh and Ram, 1997). Away from the plains of Punjab, Kullu district nestled in the Pir Panjal range. It is surrounded by the districts of Lahaul and Spiti, Kangra, Mandi, and Shimla. The river Beas runs across the Kullu valley starting from the snow clad peak of the Beas Kund. On the way, it is joined by number of tributaries. The Chhakinal watershed, selected for detailed study, lies in the centre of Kullu valley (32° N and 77° E) covering an area of about 45 sq. km. Table 1 highlights the salient features of the study area. The people, by and large, are religious by nature and almost every

village or a cluster of villages has their own local deity and related groves to whom/which they worship. Each village is a well-knit community. Various socio-religious practices, which pass on from generation to generation, are basically unsophisticated and utilitarian. The Kullu district harbours a large number of temples/shrines, like, Shikhara of Basheshwar Mahadev, Rishi Prasher at Bhunter, Bijli Mahadev and Raghunathjee of Sultanpur near Kullu, Dhungri temple (goddess Hadimba) and Vashist near Manali. A number of plants in and around those shrines are held in high esteem and thereby protected by the believers (Singh, 1997b). Every village has its own God/deity who guides them in their socio-religious life. The people live in social harmony adhering to the traditional customs. There is hardly any village where one would not find a deity and its associated house, big or small, old or new.

Kullu represents features of peculiar Vedic and Puranic deities known as the Hindu trinity, namely, Brahma - the creator of universe, Vishnu - the benefactor and the protector and Shiva - the destroyer of all evils. These deities are worshiped in numerous forms. Worship of Shiva and Vishnu are much more popular than the

worship of Brahma. The God Vishnu or Laxmi Narayan represents the Hindu mythology and ideal of the divine rishis such as Bhrgu, Markandya, Vyas, Vashist, Kartik, Gautam, Nardad, Parashar, Manu, Jamadagni and Shringi. The Chamunda, Chongasan Bhatanti, Gara Durga, Bala Sundri, Tripura Sundri, Phungni, Sarwari and Ambika and many other fall in the category of Durga/Bhagwati. The Shiva is worshiped as Bijli Mahadeva, Nither Mahadeva, Shamsher Mahadeva, Boongru and Isher Mahadeva in Kullu and Seraj. The Yoginees are the fairies of the peaks, woods, lakes and waterfalls. They are perceived as the source of divine power and spiritual strength. People perform various rituals to keep themselves free from evil spirits, epidemics, drought, famine and other natural calamities. Reverence of sacred forest viewing it as abode of God/Goddesses is very common among the people.

Each season is a festive season for the people of Kullu. Beginning of sowing and harvesting of crops and such other auspicious occasions are connected with one or the other deity. Numerous fairs and festivals revitalize the folk tradition through collective actions. During these celebrations, Kullu folk, young and old, would come out of their dwellings in large number, wearing colourful dresses and costumes to have fun and frolic. Such traditional practices have been an integral part of community living among the people of our sample area.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BENEFITS

Table 2 reveals the socio-cultural profile of the study area. People worshiped three deities, namely, Jamlu, Narayani and Basukinag. The Basukinag is supposed to be the supreme deity. The practice of respecting other deities is common among all groups of people. Varying sizes of forest precinct areas have been left untouched and protected in the name of deities believing that these areas are the abode of deities. Culture rooted in the faith and belief of deity is inevitably strong. Varying socio-economic and geo-climatic conditions could be the precious cause of mushrooming spiritual faith amongst the people. There is a sizable area under sacred grove complex in the studied areas.

Table 1: Salient Features of Man and Environment Inter-linked System of Study Area

<i>Parameters</i>	
<i>General features</i>	
Geographical area (sq.km.)	45
Elevational ranges (m amsl)	1500-4500
Population	2340
Livestock population	2184
<i>Existence of traditional practices</i>	
Existence of traditional houses (%)	100
Number of hydropower operated watermills	13
Number of hydropower operated sawmills	1
Operation of human-animal-forest based farming system (%)	100
Use of potable water (%)	100
Cultivation of traditional landraces	17
Use of minor forest produce by family (%)	94
Use of locally designed tools/implements (%)	100
Use of hand-made items (%)	98
<i>Availability of infrastructure facilities</i>	
Health center	1
School	2
Post office	1
Ration shop	2
Motorable road	yes
Electrification	yes

Table 2: Deity, Sacred Grove/Area and its Location in the Study Area

<i>Deity</i>	<i>Village/place*</i>	<i>Groves' area (ha)</i>	<i>Location</i>
Basukinag	Raman, Baltha, Cherang, Khumarhati	0.3	Inside the village
Jamlu	Baregra, Puling, Saran	0.7	Inside the village
Narayani	Rumsu	0.4	Inside the village
Basukinag	Narayani*	2.8	Away from the village
Basukinag	Nagoni*	5.5	Away from the village
Basukinag	Alpine zone*	5.0	Away from the village

The sacred groves play an important social, culture and economic role though these may not be visible very distinctly in the day-to-day activities of the people (Table 3). Due to social prohibition of procuring any thing from the grove boundary, people are unable to derive any immediate benefit from the sacred groves. Most usually they narrate that the groves provide calm and quiet space to deities. Moreover, a close look at the structuring and functioning of the sacred groves often reveals that it really involves vibrant social forces centering around the groves which help to unite heterogeneous mass of people into a solid mass. Further, in this process, they have organized informal committees to look after all the affairs related to the groves and the deity. It is a twelve members committee elected informally with general consensus of the local people. Out of 12 members, one member, locally known as *gour*, has supernatural power

and act as linkages between deity and common people. Similarly, village committee looks after the management of village and people (Table 4).

People strongly believe that local deity support overall protection of life in harsh and inhospitable conditions. It is inevitably believed that the area is protected against natural calamities (Table 3). The people institutionally admit that the local deity is supreme. Apart from this, groves/deities also provide a variety of socio-cultural visible and invisible potential benefits (Singh, 1997b). Social integrity and lessons about such a code of conduct is rooted deep in the minds of the people. The younger generation inherit those noble values from their parents/seniors. Fairs, festivals and daily rituals/worships are some of the functional mechanisms of the institution. One could only walk inside the grove bare footed provided he/she does not belong to lower caste community and is not carrying any leather article. Moreover, foreigners are also not allowed to enter inside the groves. It is significant to note that women are forbidden to enter the groves. For violation of any customary law, individuals are penalized. The penalty may be in the form of sacrificing a goat or a sheep. Sometimes the offender is asked to pay an amount as fine, as decided by the deity committee.

Table 3: Perception of the People on Values of Sacredness in the Study Area

<i>Bio-cultural values</i>	<i>Response (per cent)</i>
Act as species richness	92
Provide adequate needs	70
Provide pure drinking water	85
Support adequate water for irrigation	70
Prevent from natural catastrophic events	90
Source of strength to survive catastrophes	92
Water available in groves area cures diseases	92
Improvement of soil fertility and productivity	22
Purification of climate	45

CONSERVATION OF BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

The Nagoni area is well protected and

Table 4: Functions of Different Traditional Institutions Operating in the Study Area

<i>Category</i>	<i>Village Committee</i>	<i>Deity/Deota Committee</i>
Selection procedure	6-12 members committee informally selected from individuals of the village	12 members committee two from priest family and other selected from the villages
Function	Look after the management of natural resources, social conflict and village infrastructure management	Look after the management of all affairs related to the deity, its resource and psychological and spiritual treatment

located away from the settlements. Entire vegetation in this grove is believed to be owned by local deity and removal of even a leaf is a taboo. However, the edible fruits can only be plucked and eaten within the boundary of the grove. Extraction of firewood is occasionally permitted, but only for the purpose of deity worship.

Bio-diversity is the most potential option for sustainability. Bio-diversity based mountain systems and people's central role in their management must be appreciated rather than overlooked as "traditional". Traditional resource management system can indeed be an important tool for evolving "modern" approaches to sustainable development. The natural diversity existing in the mountains is being utilized by the local people for their sustenance and for developing diverse food production and livelihood systems. The diversity can be judged through complex farming systems, maintenance of plant species and genetic diversity of protecting area as sacred groves. The rich bio-diversity of the region is being maintained by geo-climatic variability at the micro level. Factors such as altitude, slope direction, temperature, humidity, rainfall, availability of irrigation, distance from snow line, landscape complexity, subsistence production system, social set-up and forest based resource diversification also responsible for this diversity. The said diversity has evolved various ways of human-nature-biological interactions and remarkable tradition of socio-ecological wisdom.

Sacred groves have recently been paid due attention for the bio-diversity conservation in the area. Unfortunately, the social significance of the sacred groves has not been studied in details. The linkage between environmental and culture has not been given due emphasis. Bio-diversity conservation plans should be taken up in this region in consultation with the local population. Such plans should be based environmentally sound and economically valuable to the region. The best example is *in situ* conservation, i.e. protecting forest areas through religious believes.

In fact, people of different socio-religious faith have evolved their own ways of interacting with the physical and the natural environment. The sacred grove is one such method of

expressing the gratuity of human fraternity to the trees, which sustain and support life under a given ecological and environmental condition. Indeed, it is time to begin with some of the existing but lesser known conducive mechanisms to conserve the natural resources and cultural heritage. This can be tried with involving the masses of people brought up in a bio-diversity friendly culture. Conservation of bio-diversity must, therefore, be made a people's movement.

The groves are quite rich in terms of biological wealth. As many as 13 trees, 6 shrubs and 34 herbs, totaling 53 species are recorded in grove area (Table 5). Alpine meadows which is considered as a sacred area contains 42 plant species, although tree species are not found in alpine zone. Seventeen species have cultural/religious values. Their roles in conservation can also be judged by the fact that they harbour medicinal plants species like *Dioscorea deltoidea* and *Valeriana wallichii*, which are otherwise the prime target of the people for commercial exploitation. Groves also harbour a varieties of other medicinal plants, which need to be studied in details. The dominant tree species of the groves are *Abies pindrow*, *Picea morinda*, *Cedrus deodara*, *Quercus dialatata*, *Q. semecarpifolia*, *Eugenia operculata*, and *Aesculus India*. Organic content of the groves far exceeds to that of the adjoining forest from where litter is continuously being collected by the local inhabitants to be used as cattle feeding and organic manure preparation. Such a restriction of removal of litter helps enriching the soil fertility by its decomposition, which supports the maintenance of rich level of bio-diversity in the area.

Because of its protection from the hunters, sacred areas usually harbour several endangered animals of the region, e.g. Himalayan black bear (*Selenarctos thibetanus*), Himalayan shrew (*Soriculus nigrescens*), snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*), Himalayan musk deer (*Moschus chrysogaster*), cat (*Felis chaus*), barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*), goral (*Nemorhaedus goral*), langur (*Presbytis centellus*), and blue sheep or bharal (*Pseudois nayaur*). Besides these it also harbours a variety of birds and reptiles.

Recently, the pace of deforestation has

Table 5: Richness of the Species and Cultural/Religious Values of Plants in the Study Area

Categories	Forest area	Sacred groves	Sacred area	Cultural/religious values
Tree	6	13	-	5
Shrub	5	6	2	3
Herb	26	34	40	9
Total	37	53	42	17

increased tremendously with the increasing enterprising nature of man. In the wake of biological conservation, the importance of the sacred groves has become more significant. People can be as sympathetic towards the public forests as they are towards their sacred groves, and this requires integrated training. Various traditional beliefs and knowledge of conserving the natural forests should be promoted in nearby forest area so that decreasing vegetation cover and bio-diversity can be maintained properly. Such maintenance will not only commensurate with the basic needs of the local people but also supports the local climate of the region. Traditional knowledge pertaining to the harmonious use of resources would be quite useful in designing the bio-diversity conservation programmes. If such repository knowledge is not going to be promoted then the day is not far off when the forest area would recede to such an unexpected extent that even minimal basic needs of the people may not be fulfilled.

The groves which are located in the vicinity of the settlements are disappearing at a faster rate because trees are being used for construction and repairing of deity houses. Here the other contributing factors are animal grazing, fuel wood and fodder collection and medicinal plant extraction. The areas close to the farming field are now under the process of encroachment. Nature of exploitation is higher in groves, located closer to village boundary. Diversity of plant species is much better in the groves located away from the hamlets as compared to those located in the vicinity of the hamlets.

In conclusion, one may say that in early days men were carefully handling different components of nature for their livelihood. Even today, one can find a strong man-nature relationship in some pockets of Kullu valley. The traditional unwritten code of conduct in this region has

given shape to many socio-religious institutions. The fast growth of infrastructural facilities and entry of various modernizing forces have recently started widening the gap between the People's faith in the sacred groves and their commercial attitude to life. Spread of mono-culture of high yielding variety of food and fruit crops in this region has been justified by the government authorities on the ground of increased productivity. The introduction of various modern techniques (which are mostly planned on a short-term basis) has attracted people to move away from the traditional knowledge based packages. Recently, there is a strong need to promote such indigenous practices of bio-diversity conservation for the long-term sustainability. Indigenous knowledge needs to be incorporated for the management of overall stability of the area. Such socio-culturally protected areas would be more imperative if one could scientifically value bio-diversity in terms of utility, culture and religion. These indigenous systems would guide to frame a strategy for local, regional, national and global bio-diversity conservation. Such system would be analogous to the modern ways of protecting areas under sanctuaries, national parks and biosphere reserves. It has been felt that there is an urgent need to involve local people, NGOs, social institutions, planners and managers in reviving those traditional practices through training, education and awareness programmes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is thankful to Prof. P.S. Ramakrishnan, Dr. K.G. Saxena, and Dr. N.A. Farooque for their valuable support and encouragement. Comments received from Dr. Gulab Singh on the previous draft is also gratefully acknowledged.

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