



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sacred Groves of India and Ethnic Women: A Study**Shipra Sharma¹, Yashoda Saini¹, Preeti Srivastava*² and Jai Kr. Sharma³**¹Department of environmental Science, S.S. Jain Subodh P.G. College, Jaipur²Department of Zoology, S.S. Jain Subodh P.G. College, Jaipur³ Society for Health Awareness and Protection of Environment, Jaipur*Email of Corresponding Author: drspreeti.99@gmail.comReceived: 29th Jan. 2017, Revised: 4th March 2017, Accepted: 8th March 2017**ABSTRACT**

From ancient time sacred groves have a great significance in biodiversity conservation because they contain some important species of flora and fauna that have been lost in the surrounding area. In India, sacred groves are found mainly in tribal dominated areas and are maintained by tribal communities' especially tribal women. They always found to be more religious and actively participating in all rituals and religious ceremonies. This review article tried to dredge the relationship that women have with biodiversity, its contributions to survival, well-being and empowerment; the ways women make use of it; their knowledge, perspectives and visions; and their roles in conservation and management.

Key words: *sacred grooves, tribal community, women, knowledge, perspectives*

INTRODUCTION

Sacred groves are a very ancient and widespread phenomenon in the old world cultures. In India many communities practice different forms of worship of nature. One such significant tradition of nature worship was that of providing protection to patches of forests designated as sacred groves dedicated to deities or ancestral spirits. In India, the sacred groves were reported earlier from the Himalayas, North-east India, highlands of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. These groves were protected by local communities, usually through customary taboos and sanctions with cultural and ecological implications. It is the expression of the relationship of man with the divine or with nature (Hughes & Chandran, 1998). Living in harmony with nature is part of their lifestyle. All nature is sacred for them. The importance of sacred groves in the conservation of biological diversity has been well recognized. Earlier studies by various workers on floristic and ethno-botanical aspects of sacred groves provided detailed scientific account of the sacred groves in India (Gadgil & Vartak, 1975, 1976, 1981; Chandran *et al.*, 1998; Malhotra, 1998; Malhotra & Das, 1997; Malhotra *et al.*, 1997, 2000). An important aspect of conservation of these sacred groves is the involvement and leadership of grassroots women. Besides being the providers of life, women also nourish and sustain life. Traditionally it was the woman, who played an important role in conserving life forms. This paper delves into the relationship of women with biodiversity in the form of sacred groves, highlighting contributions of biodiversity to women's survival, well-being and empowerment; the ways women make use of it; their knowledge, perspectives and visions; and their roles in conservation and management.

DISTRIBUTION OF SACRED GROVES IN INDIA

In India the sacred groves are found all over the country especially in the regions inhabited by indigenous communities, particularly along the Western Ghats in the states of Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka and Tamilnadu. In North-east India most of the sacred groves has been reported from Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Manipur. Although there has been no comprehensive survey of the sacred groves in the entire country approximately 13,720 sacred groves have been documented so far. Experts estimate the actual number could be much higher in the range of 100,000–150,000 (Ampili Bharat Kumar IFS, Conservator of Forests, Vishakhapatnam-530003, Forest Department, Andhra Pradesh).

CLASSIFICATION OF SACRED FORESTS

Various studies by experts like M. Gadgil, K.C. Malhotra, Y. Gokhale, S. Chatterjee and J.J. Roy Burman have revealed the following classification of Sacred Groves:

1. Traditional Sacred Groves:

These are the places where the local village deity resides. Such groves are generally on the periphery of the village or at crossroads eg. Gaondevi or Gramdevi Groves. Every tribal/rural village all over Thane District has a Gaondevi Mandir. Gaondevi is the village goddess. She is represented by a large stone or wooden icon, shaped ovular with prominent eyes painted on it.

2. Temple Groves:

These are created around a temple and conserved by the Government, the temple trust or some other organization. Such groves invariably cover a much larger area as compared to others.

3. Burial/Cremation/ Memorial Groves:

These groves are created around burial sites, cremation grounds, on agricultural land or near the Grove of the Village Goddess. They are dedicated to the people who have toiled hard to protect the land or to the members of the family who have passed away.

However, the data obtained by this researcher also revealed the following classifications:

4. Sacred Groves on Mountain Tops:

Such groves are usually found right on top of a mountain anywhere between 3000–5000 feet above sea level. Such groves are not frequented by the villagers because they are so high up in the mountains. The priests themselves also visit the grove once a month and if they are aged, only once a year for the annual ritual.

5. Groves on Agricultural Land:

These groves that are found on land where only a small area has been demarcated for the makeshift temple and for religious worship. The land around the grove has been cleared for cultivation.

6. Groves protecting Water Bodies:

These are groves near lakesides or in caves or on mountain top where there is a perennial water body that is protected.

NEED OF CONSERVATION

Changes in religious beliefs, socio-economic scenario, increasing human population uncontrolled inflow of visitors, soil excavation works and other developmental pressures have resulted in deterioration of many sacred groves in the recent past. Invasion of exotic weeds is also a major threat.

ROLE OF RURAL WOMEN

Many communities living in the forest are repositories of traditional knowledge related to biodiversity, which is vital for their own survival in the forest ecosystem. Traditional knowledge is unique local knowledge existing and expanded within and around the specific conditions of people indigenous to a particular geographical area (Warren, 1992). This knowledge is woven in indigenous people's memories and actions and is reflected in their lifestyle.

With the use of natural resources ethnic women play central role in the household activities and take care of food and nutritional need of their families. It is crucial for them to sustain natural resources for their livelihood sustainability. This makes them closer to ecosystem surrounding them with detailed knowledge about the species.

Various studies have shown that men's and women's preferences and utilization of biological resources and conservation practices are not always the same. Women prefer biological resources for use in households, whereas men prefer to use these resources to earn income. Women are

believed to be conservative, deep thinker, perfectly ritualistic, eco-friendly minded, keen on religion, ardent religious minded, nature lover and good eco-planner. For example Tea cultivation and Tulsitala/basil plant worshipping are mainly maintained by female group since a long time in India. Women are more conscious about formation, construction, structuring, and evaluation. For information, children are developed in body and mind shadowed by her maternal love and care, which a father cannot play with the same marvelous role zeal. Regarding the gender of the priest, it appears that without an exception the priesthood rests with males (Godbole *et al*, 1998). In fact they can be considered as managers of natural resources. They are often plays a mediator role in passing their knowledge (Anonymous 2012).

Scientists have discovered that already in the early Stone Age (15,000-9,000 B.C.), women's roles and tasks in hunter-gatherer communities were explicitly linked to biodiversity, with the natural environment in essence determining their status and wellbeing. For example, Owen (1998) describes women collecting and conserving edible plants that contributed 50 to 70 per cent of dietary requirements (Women and biodiversity: the core of existence Chapter 3). Women are always found to be more religious and actively participating in all religious ceremonies. Many plants and leaves are used for religious purposes and during festivals.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Results of the present study are expected to create awareness among the present and future generations on the need and importance of conservation and management of the sacred groves as a treasure of biodiversity and gene pool of the State as well as the Country.

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