



## 31.0 Sacred Groves: People's Contribution to Conservation

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### Introduction

Today when the earth is in a state of biodiversity crunch, environmentalists are looking back through the ages to our ancestors, who had some indigenous ways to conserve nature. One of the traditional ways to conserve nature is the system of Sacred Groves (SGs). Sacred groves must be the first temple of worship in the world, made by primitive human societies to worship nature. If defined, the sacred groves are forest patches of varying size, from a few trees to several hectares. They are sometimes dedicated to some deity or ancestral spirit and are sanctified to the extent that they become divine and cutting them becomes a taboo. Though this tradition has now been receded to remote villages and in some cases to folklores and folk tales, they are quite relevant even today as they always have been. According to famous folklorist of 20<sup>th</sup> century Charlotte Burne, the tribes of Votiaks of eastern Russia sing that the woods are always sacred from where not a single tree may cut down or else the God of the woods will avenge the injury. Like wise in many parts of the world trees were regarded as being divine and the place having these trees was regarded as sacred groves. Such groves were often located around homes and surrounding the village and to break even a twig off was a sacrilege (Frazer 1919). The supernatural power of some water bodies like healing and curing some ailments in different parts of the world has been documented by many workers (Olsen 2004, Tarasov 2003). Very often sacred groves were considered as having infinite magical power to grant punishment or to carry out miracles (Philpot & Mac Millan 1897, Parish 2005, Altman 2000).

### Role of Sacred Groves

Besides social, cultural and economic services, the sacred groves have the potential to serve as gene pool and may help to maintain ecological balance. National Forest Policy (1988) states that the SGs are the last remnants of natural forests and are extremely valuable store house of biodiversity. Larger sacred groves can harbour high species richness and they play a significant role in *in situ* conservation of plants. Sometimes SGs give refugia to rare, endangered and endemic species. The SGs preserve the micro-climate within its area and increase nutrient cycling; it also recharges aquifers and act as primary source of perennial streams. Keeping in view the value of SGs, researchers have given various names to the SGs, such as Refugia for rare and threatened species, Laboratory of environmentalists, Compensation for carbon emissions (Carbon sink), Recreational and spiritual point, Reservoir of medicinal plants, Socially valued ecosystem, Heritage of cultural and traditional knowledge. If harnessed properly these groves along with the indigenous wisdom of its community can serve as multi-functional units of conservation.

### Sacred Groves in Uttarakhand

The rural communities in Uttarakhand also have retained the tradition of worshipping sacred places such as Bugiyals (sacred alpine meadows), Dev Vans, *etc.* Mostly a few individual trees of a species *e.g.*, *Cedrus*, *Cupressus*, *Pinus* and *Quercus* or single tree of some importance in the vicinity of the village are sanctified along with small temple. Such



places are locally known as 'Thans'. They are well preserved lush green patches. Sometimes individual of trees that attain giant size are considered sacred as they are believed to witness the changing history of the place and hence dedicated to local deities. For example, Deodar (*Cedrus deodara*) tree in Jageshwar (8.3m girth and 30m height), Noble cypress (*Cupressus torulosa*) tree in Devi Anusuea temple (6.25m girth and 32m height), Silk cotton (*Bombax ceiba*) tree near Sitarganj (12m girth and 28m height), Mulberry (*Morus serrata*) tree in Joshimath (18m girth and >5096 yrs old).

Though, detailed surveys of sacred groves have not been done in Uttarakhand so far, some of the well known sacred groves which support either an ecosystem or single species conservation are dedicated to a number of deities like Bhadraj (the deity who is known to teach cattle rearing), Mahasu, Shakumbari and Tarkeshwar Mahadev. Other places such as Patal Bhubaneshwar (rocks and caves with calcareous tufa), Garanath, Binsar, Mayadevi Ashram and Narayan Ashram harbor various floral and faunal elements, some of which could be rare, threatened and endemic species.

Most of the sacred groves in the state are located in Deodar zone or dominated by this species, which support various medicinal plants. *Taxus baccata* subsp. *wallichiana* is one of the most important medicinal plants growing under its canopy in Jageshwar and hence protected, while outside the grove this species is under tremendous pressure. The sacred Deodar forest patches spread over 2-5 km<sup>2</sup> area and are devoted to various deities. Some examples of sacred Deodar forests include Jageshwar and Dhauladevi in Almora district, Tarkeshwar in Pauri district, Devalsari (temple devoted to a saint) in Tehri district, Hat-Kali and Chamunda in Pithoragarh district. Some times natural structures (caves and crevices) also enhance the value of forest patches, e.g., Patal-Bhuwaneshwar in Pithoragarh and Gauri Udiyar in Bageshwar districts. The famous deity Golu Devta of Kumaun region has several groves (Chitai, Ghorakhal, Gairar, Minar, Chamarkhan, Bari Goljyu) which are mostly under mixed pine-oak forests. Padiyar Devta, a well known local deity at 3400m altitude above Auli, Joshimath is seated under *Quercus semecarpifolia* forest, where the herders pray before entering the forest to safeguard their cattle from natural calamities and wild animals (Plate 31). Although, the groves have patchy distribution still they play a crucial role in maintaining biodiversity and provide protection to the local flora and fauna (Dhaila-Adhikari & Adhikari 2007).

Sometimes the sacred places give refuge to the rare tree species as in case of Chandhak temple of Pithoragarh. The 'Sweet *Osmanthus*' (*Osmanthus fragrans*) tree, which is an evergreen small tree with lustrous medium sized leaves. The flowers are extremely fragrant and perfume the entire landscape during winter to spring. Larger sacred groves also have their own micro-climate which increase nutrient cycling, recharge aquifers and act as primary source of perennial streams. For example, Shikhareshwer SG in Gangolihat (Pithoragarh) where Deodar forest forms catchment for perennial water stream (Naula).

In many groves villagers perform rituals and ceremonies to please the deity for well being and prosperity of the community. Sacred groves are the mirror image of cultural and economic set up of a community and their respect for nature. Some of the trees which are considered as sacred and worshiped in the state are Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), Bargad (*F. benghalensis*), Bel (*Aegle marmelos*), Deodar (*Cedrus deodara*), Padam (*Prunus cerasoides*), Timur (*Xanthoxylum alatum*), Amla (*Emblica officinalis*), Mango (*Mangifera indica*), Neem (*Azadirachta indica*), Doob (*Cynodon dactylon*) and Banana (*Musa paradisiaca*). Peepal tree in the villages near Lohaghat is worshiped. These trees had been planted by the ancestors of the village and are still revered by their progeny. These trees are treated as family members and all the rituals, due to family members such as thread ceremony and marriage with some other religious trees as Mango and Aonla, are performed. In Kumaun region of Uttarakhand it is observed that the forest patches which



**Plate 31  
Sacred Groves of Western Himalaya**



A Sacred Grove under Kharsu Oak  
Forest near Auli, Joshimath (3400 m)



Dhaura Devi Sacred Grove  
under Deodar Forest



Gairar Sacred Grove under Chir Pine  
forest



Himalayan Cypress, one of the  
important species planted around  
religious sites in Uttarakhand



Group of temples at Jageshwar Sacred  
Grove under deodar forest



were under severe biotic pressure and over exploited have been dedicated to the local deity after a consent of the community *e.g.*, Shyahi devi in Almora.

There are a number of small SGs in Uttarakhand, but they have not been documented due to their small size. Hence, it is not possible for the forest department to take any action to protect such SGs. Likewise, several other states are still waiting to enlist the SGs. So far, no legal protection has been given to these groves, except at few places *e.g.*, sites of Archaeological Survey of India or where Forest Department is involved. In other places, its belief, taboo or fetishism which makes them inviolate. So, the institute of sacred groves is the cradle, where the faith and beliefs are nurtured together with the habitats and biodiversity.

### Threats and challenges

The SGs are rapidly losing their ground in many parts of India due to following reasons:

- Erosion of traditional beliefs and rapid socio-economic advancement has led to the deterioration of sacred groves. Fading respect towards traditional knowledge among youngsters is one of the causes of concern,
- Developmental projects such as roads, dams, highways and encroachment by people migrating from outside having no respect for traditional values,
- Transformation of traditional worship of nature into formal Hindu practice, which is called *Sanskritization* like shifting the focus to idols than a simple stone, building temples which include clearing of the area.
- Heavy tourism sometimes becomes a burden to SGs, if the tourists are not aware of the fragile aspect of the nature.
- Fragmentation or split among families owning sacred groves.

### Way forward

Progress and modernity not at all means avoiding the old customs and traditions. Therefore, the following aspects can be made for well being of SGs conservation.

- Inventory, documentation and the status of SGs.
- Revitalization of traditional culture, such as folk tales and folklores.
- Incentives to the local communities for maintaining and restoring SGs.
- Role of NGOs, Forest department and academia through community participation.

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