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Sacred Groves

Ecologists, of late, have come out with studies on the remarkable systems of resource management by many traditional societies, which, while based on simple rules of the thumb, in many ways parallel the modern ecosystem approach. Such societies existed in different countries, regions or cultures like ancient Sumeria, Ottoman Empire, Japan, Amerindia, South-east Asia, Fiji, India, Mali, etc. These societies had co-evolved with their environment, modifying nature but actively maintaining it in a diverse and productive state. Such indigenous ecosystem approaches, which enshrine in them a pool of human experience spanning many millenia and many cultures, have suffered severe setbacks under the more recent systems of exploitative management, often called scientific, elaborated largely by colonialists. The irony is that just as scientists are beginning to appreciate folk-ecology and its implications, a monolithic vision of modern resource management is engulfing these traditional systems.

Sacred groves are one of the finest instances of traditional conservation practices. They have also formed centres of cultural and religious life for people over much of the old world. These groves got demolished in Europe and West Asia and most other lands due to the arrival of modern religions and consequent changes in man's attitude towards nature. The cosmocentric man, who lived in harmony with his ecosystem, developed into an anthropocentric creature with devastating consequences on nature. The grove was said to be at the origin of the temple, whose columns were initially trees, and of the Christian church which still evokes by the alignment of its pillars, the semi-darkness within it, and the soft coloured light that filters through its stained glass windows.

Apparently due to the greater plasticity of Hinduism, which itself evolved absorbing numberless local cults, including many

tribals ones, instead of vanquishing them as done by other major religions, a large number of sacred groves remained in our country. We also have the tradition of planting and protecting sacred trees like *Ficus*, probably dating back to the Indus Valley culture. In the words of D. Brandis (1897), the first Inspector General of Forests in India:

> Very little has been published regarding sacred groves in India, but they are, or rather were, very numerous. I have found them in nearly all provinces. As instances I may mention the Garo and Khasia hills ... the Devara Kadus of Coorg and all the hill ranges of Salem district in the Madras Presidency. ... In the dry region sacred groves are particularly numerous in Rajputana. .. In Mewar they usually consist of *Anogeissus pendula* ... in Partapgarh and Banswara .... the sacred groves, here called *Maluan*, consist of a variety of trees. ... These .... as a rule, are never touched by the axe, except when wood is wanted for the repair of religious buildings. ..

Brandis also made a unique discovery of a remarkable grove near Gorakhpur maintained by Mian Sahib, a Muslim saint.

Sacred groves are particularly numerous all along the Western Ghats and the west coast even today. William Logan (1920), in his *Malabar Manual*, refers to the practice of setting aside the south-west corner of the gardens of "all respectable Malayali Hindus" for the natural growth of wild jungle dedicated to the snakes (*sarpakavu*) where "every tree and bush, every branch and twig is sacred. ..." The 1921 Census Report stated that Travancore, in southern Kerala, alone had 12,000 *kavus* or groves. *Ayyappan kavus* of Kerala Western Ghats are often patches of dense primeval forests. The sacred hill of Sabarimala where millions flock every year could have been originally a sacred grove. Remnants of sacred groves or large groves themselves are found even today associated with the Mother Goddess or *Bhagavati*. These groves have become centres of folklore and part of the cultural tradition of Kerala.

The Bishnois of Rajasthan never uproot or kill any *khejadi* (*Prosopis cineraria*) tree. Some 350 years ago the prince of Jodhpur needed wood to fuel lime kilns for building a new palace, and for that purpose attempted to fell a grove of *khejadi* trees in a nearby village. It is narrated that several Bishnois who hugged the trees to save them from being cut down were massacred by the soldiers. The appalled prince ordered his men back and granted Bishnoi religion, founded by Guru Jambaji in 1451, state sanction. One of the earliest

conservationists, the guru believed that the environment had to be protected in our own interests. As a result the Bishnoi villages are said to be oases of greenery in the deserts of Rajasthan.

In the Sarguja district of Madhya Pradesh every village has a grove of about 20 hectares in extent where both plant and animal life receives absolute protection. These are known as *sharana* forests, meaning sanctuary.

To a great extent, sacred groves in the hilly and mountainous regions of India are a legacy of the shifting cultivators. Humid tropical regions often have the paradoxical situation of luxuriance of vegetation on the one hand and poverty of soil on the other. Indeed the nutrient capital in such areas is more in the vegetation than in the soil. This situation is responsible for the practice of shifting cultivation by traditional people in humid tropics. The slash and burn system would mean the community losing the blessings of the species rich tropical forests. On the contrary, studies by the authors in Western Ghats and by many others elsewhere in our country show that the shifting cultivation system was associated with protection of substantial patches of forests as sacred groves. These sacred groves, almost an integral part of every agricultural settlement, ranged in size from small patches of less than five hectares to large ones of few hundred hectares. The practice of declaring part of the forests sacred in the *jhum* areas of north-eastern hill regions of India has done a great deal to keep the vegetation unchanged. Sacred groves have preserved the biological diversity of that particular region which has vanished from other surrounding areas.

The British colonial administration did not try to understand the role of shifting cultivation in the lives of millions of people in India. It also failed to appreciate the ethics of these cultivators regarding land and resource use. Shifting cultivation was prohibited except in small pockets in tribal areas. Further, all forests, including shifting cultivation fallows, became state property. The sacred groves often merged with the regeneration forests on past cultivation areas and other ordinary forests and often lost their identity. They were, therefore, treated at par with regeneration forests and even organised under forest working plans for commercial extraction of timber and firewood as well as other forest produce causing considerable devastation. Nevertheless these sacred groves, though in attenuated form, continue to function as important centres of biodiversity. Indeed the attitude of pre-British village communities towards forests

is reflected in the statement of the British traveller, Francis Buchanan, made near Karwar in Uttara Kannada: "The forests are the property of the gods of the villages in which they are situated, and the trees ought not to be cut without having leave from the *Gauda* or headman of the village .... who here also is priest (*pujari*) to the temple of the village god."

Buchanan thought the system of sacred groves was a "contrivance" of the people to prevent the colonial government from claiming their property. The so-called "scientific forestry" which the British launched from mid-nineteenth century involved opportunistic logging of as much of marketable timber, firewood and bamboo as possible as well as destructive extraction of non-wood produce through the agency of contractors—practices which hardly prevailed in India during the pre-British period. Nevertheless the remains of scores of sacred groves, the leftovers of a lofty tradition, continue to remain in many parts of India.

The authors have found that the *gurjan* tree, *Dipterocarpus indicus*, has its northern limit in the Western Ghats in a couple of sacred groves of Uttara Kannada (North Canara). Similarly, *Myristica* swamp, a rare and threatened habitat, belonging to southern Kerala, has its northern limit once again in a sacred grove of Uttara Kannada. A rare tree species, *Myristica magnifica* and *Pinanga dicksoni*, a beautiful slender endemic palm from the Western Ghats are characteristic plants of this swamp. A new species of a leguminous climber *Kunstleria keralensis* has been reported from one of the *kavus* of Kerala Another *kavu* has five species of the evergreen tree *Hopea* of which three are endemic to south-west India. Four more threatened species of plants *Blepharistemma membranifolia*, *Buchanania lanceolata*, *Pterospermum reticulatum* and *Syzygium travancoricum* have been discovered surviving in the sacred groves of Kerala. A sacred grove in the Maharashtra Western Ghats was found to preserve two magnificent specimens of *Dhup* tree (*Canarium strictum*) otherwise present only in Uttara Kannada, few hundred kilometers towards the south. The authors have also noticed a small pocket of endangered primates, lion-tailed macaques, in and around a sacred grove, Katlekan of Uttara Kannada.

Landscape ecological studies by the authors in Uttara Kannada district indicate that during the pre-British period, when community management of natural resources prevailed, there existed a high amount of landscape heterogeniety promoting greater biodiversity.

The land was a mosaic of pristine sacred groves, ordinary supply forests from where the community extracted firewood, minor timber, leaf manure, etc., in a regulated fashion, shifting cultivation fallows in different stages of vegetational succession, pastures and other natural physiographic features. This was a period of maximum diversity and richness of wildlife, as could be ascertained from several travelogues and the *Kanara Gazetteer* of 1883. Indeed hunting and gathering was a way of life for the shifting cultivators.

The depletion of forest resources due to over-exploitation for commercial purposes resulted in inclusion of numerous sacred groves in forest working plans for selective felling as in Uttara Kannada and Coorg. Through planting of coffee and tea, a number of groves are feared to be extinct. There is an instance of a large grove getting clear-felled and converted into a *Eucalyptus* plantation in Siddapur *taluk* of Uttara Kannada. Indeed the capacity of the *kan* forests (sacred groves) to store water and leave a controlled perennial flow in the streams was known to the colonial Government of Bombay Presidency. Therefore, logging and clear-felling naturally would affect the watershed value of the groves. Indeed, the authors have found that several sacred groves are even today associated with waterbodies like streams, rivers and ponds.

Another insidious threat resulting in clearance of sacred groves is the identification of the wild woodland spirits and deities of the pre-Brahmanic societies with the gods of the Hindu pantheon. This has resulted in the installation of idols of Hindu gods in the groves or the deities of the groves are made minions of Hindu gods. Often this is followed by temple construction after fully or partially clearing the vegetation. One may cite the instances of Karikan temple in Uttara Kannada, Talacauvery in Coorg and Bhagvati temples and Sabarimala in Kerala. The time has come to carefully retrospect the course of Hindu religion and cultural heritage and redefine what is sacred. Immediate efforts should be made to identify, map, protect and even restore the sacred groves, lest we lose a priceless heritage passed on to us unharmed by our ancestors.