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A study of sacred grove of a village sargiguda in Kalahandi, Odisha

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Abstract

Sacred forests are being protected by means of cultural and religious beliefs by the local communities. Sacred forests are one of the oldest forms of biodiversity conservation sites effectively managed by local tribes as in present study which was carried out in the village Sargiguda of Kalahandi district as to collect the information regarding the role and potential of sacred groves. The present paper therefore, explores the role of sacred groves in conservation and management of biodiversity in Indian tribes.

Keywords: Sacred groves, tribes, biodiversity, Sargiguda, Kalahandi

Introduction

Sacred Groves is an age-old tradition where a patch of forest or water body is dedicated to local deities and none is allowed to cut plants or to kill animals or any form of life (Gaikwad, Paralikar, Chavan and Krishnan, 2004) [5]. The institution of sacred groves dates back to the pre-agrarian hunting-gathering phase of human civilization, and is known to thrive in most parts of India (Kosambi, 1962) [11]. It has been estimated that total number of sacred groves in the country lies between 100,000 and 150,000 (Malhotra, *et al.*, 1999) [13].

Sacred groves are piece of forest having rich biodiversity and are protected by local tribes to keep them in a relatively undisturbed state and act as the traditional way of in situ conservation of biodiversity.

As per the definition provided by IUCN, "Sacred groves form a part of worshiping nature and are considered as Sacred Natural Sites". Although, people associated with such sacred groves are generally illiterate, they have indigenously brought out their traditional customs, rituals, ceremonies and way of forest life. Sacred groves are also reservoirs of many traditional medicines. With this realisation, there has been a rapid development in the study of resources belonging to sacred groves as well as their conservation. These practices are not only for ecological importance but also for socio-cultural and religious significance of the state.

Most of the tribal communities dedicate sacred groves to the local deities. These groves may consist of a diverse species, or a cluster of trees, depending on the locality. These groves are generally protected by the local communities through some customary taboos and sanctions. Many rare plant species which are used in traditional medicines have been preserved in such sacred groves. The sacred groves are an immense source of a variety of medicinal plants, fruits, fodder, fuel wood, spices, etc. In India, the sacred groves were reported earlier from the Himalayas, North-east India, highlands of Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, particularly where the indigenous communities live. The floristic and ethno-botanical aspects of sacred groves in India have been dealt by many workers. Many plants species believed to be threatened in the forest are well conserved in many of the sacred groves. The sacredness, religious beliefs and taboos plays an important role in the conservation of flora and fauna of the region. Kalahandi district of Odisha, India is the home for a number of tribal communities having their own culture, customs, traditions and practices in connection with the rituals of their day to day life. They believe that the village deities reside in the sacred groves and are worshiped under a tree at the isolated and demarcated area outside of the village. They show utmost respect to these places and preserve them like precious treasure. The biodiversity studies of sacred groves of Kalahandi district by earlier workers are incomplete and scanty and there is a lack of systematic study on floral diversity and its importance of sacred groves. Keeping in view of the above points, the present paper deals with the systematic study on floral diversity and its importance.

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Material and Methods

An ethno-botanical exploration by the authors was made to find out the floristic diversity and the importance of the sacred groves or Debta Gudi as called by the local people of the village Sargiguda in Kalahandi District of Odisha during March to June 2019. Field studies were undertaken during this period. The village pujhari or the Jhankar named Dambarudhar Majhi was interviewed to gather information regarding the sacred grove of this village.



Fig 1: Sacred grove of Sargiguda village



Fig 2: Pujhari of Debta Gudi

Study Site

The village Sargiguda lies in the North of Bhawanipatna town, about 14 kms. Away along the Bhawanipatna-Thuamul Rampur road. From the main road, at Sagada Chhak, a tarmac motorable road of about 3 kms. Long connects the village. The village comes under Bhawanipatna Tahsil of Kalahandi District, Odisha. The total geographical area of the village is about 211 acres. The south side of the village is bounded by Murljore River. The total population of this village is about 238 and has about 47 houses. The village has also one hamlet of about 7 households called Jhankar para.

The population is primarily dominated by Gond along with other castes like Kandha, Kutia, Goud, Teli etc. Eventhough their houses are clustered in small area, there is settlement segregation based on ethnicity. The Gonds occupy the central portion of the village road while the remaining groups are settled on the periphery.

The main livestock found in the village are cattle, buffalo, goat, sheep, dog and hen. There are about hundreds of cows and buffaloes and hundreds of goats and sheep. Grazing is mainly done inside the forest and on fallow cultivation fields. The Kandha in the village takes care of grazing of the whole village livestock. In return for his services, he is given annual paddy proportionate to the cows and occasional cloth and food on festive occasions.

The main occupation of the villagers is cultivation. They practice wet land cultivation. Besides, they also plant

vegetables and other fruit bearing trees in home gardens. Those who have no wet land for cultivation take up tenant farming. The main crops grown are rice, moong, arhar, ragi, maize and many varieties of vegetables in different seasons. They sell some of the vegetables (brinjal, chili, tomato, beans, lady finger, bitter guard, pumpkin), most of the households do not produce sufficient food. Some of them purchase rice from outside mainly from Government depot of public distribution system (PDS).

Sacred Grove

The discussion with the pujhari revealed that some divine and semi-divine spirits like Dharani, Thakurani, Maili, etc. are believed to be residing in this sacred grove. Actually, the entire vegetation is considered sacred. The Jhankar confirmed it and said “the gods live among all the trees found in this Debta Gudi and we worship all the trees”

As a result the grove is under strict socio-cultural taboos in harvesting of plant biomass, none of the products from the sacred grove was exploited for any purposes and it is to be kept undisturbed. The protection of sacred site was maintained by the belief in powers of different deities residing in the trees hence no policing or monitoring is required. As per the locals, any one violating the established norms and values are punished by the village deities. In the village, the communities, irrespective of ethnicity, religion, language, age or gender observed traditional values and ethics in maintaining the biological and cultural integrity of the sacred site.

The villagers have a four member village committee to look after the sacred grove of the village. In that meeting they discussed about the need for the protection of the forest in the name of Debta Gudi. They agreed to start protection in a way to keep a vigil on the forest and punish the offenders.



Fig 3: Thakurani temple inside the Debta Gudi

Conclusion

An attempt by the authors was made to study the flora of the sacred grove of the village Sargiguda. Authors enumerated the common plant taxa. A list of plant species which formed the vegetation covering the sacred grove or Debta gudi of the village is given in Table 1:

A total of 48 plant species belonging to 33 different families were recorded from the sacred grove or Debta Gudi of the village Sargiguda. A maximum of 7 plant species belonged to the family Fabaceae were found dominant in this sacred

grove. The results of the present study also provide evidence that sacred groves are the conservation sites for several rare and endangered medicinal plants which are in the verge of extinction.

Hence, awareness should be created among the local people for protection and conservation of floral diversities. Initiatives should be taken by the government to protect such green patches available near the religious sites of the state. Let the religious beliefs be the source of inspiration to protect the scared groves of Kalahandi, Odisha.

Table 1: List of Plants found in the Sacred Grove of Sargiguda

Botanical Name of the Plant	Family	Local Name
<i>Achyranthes aspera</i>	Amaranthaceae	Kukur daanti
<i>Aegle marmelos</i>	Rutaceae	Bela
<i>Ageratum conyzoides</i>	Asteraceae	Poksungha
<i>Alstonia scholaris</i>	Apocyanaceae	Chhatim
<i>Andrographis paniculata</i>	Acanthaceae	Bhuin nimb
<i>Annona squamosa</i>	Annonaceae	Rainkata
<i>Argemone mexicana</i>	Papaveraceae	Bhejri
<i>Aristolochia indica</i>	Aristolochiaceae	Panairi
<i>Azadirachta indica</i>	Meliaceae	Leem
<i>Boerhavia diffusa</i>	Nyctaginaceae	Puruni
<i>Bombax ceiba</i>	Malvaceae	Semale
<i>Butea monosperma</i>	Fabaceae	Palasa
<i>Cassia fistula</i>	Fabaceae	Sunaari
<i>Chloroxylon swietenia</i>	Rutaceae	Bheru
<i>Cleistanthus collinus</i>	Phyllanthaceae	Karada
<i>Cleoma viscosa</i>	Cleomaceae	Kua Kanda
<i>Curculigo orchoides</i>	Hypoxidaceae	Talmuli
<i>Cynodon dactylon</i>	Poaceae	Doob ghaas
<i>Cyperus rotundus</i>	Cyperaceae	Mutha
<i>Diospyros melanoxylon</i>	Ebenaceae	Kendu
<i>Eclipta prostate</i>	Asteraceae	Bhrungaraj
<i>Ficus carica</i>	Moraceae	Dumer
<i>Hemidesmus indicus</i>	Apocyanaceae	Sugandhi
<i>Hibiscus rosa-sinensis</i>	Malvaceae	Mandaar
<i>Holarrhena antidysenterica</i>	Apocyanaceae	Kurei
<i>Jatropha curcas</i>	Euphorbiaceae	Ramjada
<i>Limonia acidissima</i>	Rutaceae	Kaintha
<i>Madhuca indica</i>	Sapotaceae	Mahool
<i>Mangifera indica</i>	Anacardiaceae	Aam
<i>Millettia pinnata</i>	Fabaceae	Karanja
<i>Mimosa pudica</i>	Fabaceae	Laajakuli
<i>Nyctanthus arbour-tristis</i>	Oleaceae	Gangasiuli
<i>Passiflora foetida</i>	Passifloraceae	Bisiripi
<i>Pergularia daemia</i>	Asclepiadaceae	Uturuli
<i>Phyllanthus emblica</i>	Phyllanthaceae	Aanla
<i>Phyllanthus niruri</i>	Phyllanthaceae	Bhuin aanla
<i>Semecarpus anacardium</i>	Anacardiaceae	Bhelia
<i>Smilax microphylla</i>	Smilacaceae	Muturi
<i>Tephrosia purpurea</i>	Fabaceae	Jangali kulath
<i>Terminalia arjuna</i>	Combretaceae	Arjuna
<i>Tinospora cordifolia</i>	Menispermaceae	Guluchilata
<i>Vitex negundo</i>	Lamiaceae	Begunia

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