

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF ECOLOGY CONSERVATION IN TRIBES OF CHHATTISGARH

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The world today has many environmental challenges such as climate change, the depletion of the ozone layer, trans-boundary pollution and depletion of natural resources by its over exploitation for development activities, growth of industrialization adding the pollution problems etc. Realizing that conserving the rich cultural diversity that we have been losing so rapidly in the course rapid urbanization and industrialization of human societies is important, we need to base our developmental strategies on a value system that a given society understands and appreciates. The new vision of reality is an ecological vision, which in a sense goes far beyond the immediate concerns for environmental protection. This practice of nature conservation is prevalent in indigenous culture of Chhattisgarh as well as in other parts of the country. The socio-religious practices prevalent among the tribes of Chhattisgarh are helpful in conservation and protection of rare species of plants and animals.

Introduction

In 21st century, Global warming and Climate change is a major issue for world leaders and scientists. Climate change and environmental pollution is affecting overall life of the earth. The forces of rapid economic growth, cultural and demographic changes, and political expediency, are all responsible for the widespread decimation of natural ecosystems and hundreds of species, as also for the uprooting and dispossession of millions of people. Development and economic policies and programmes appear to be in direct conflict with policies and programmes enacted for safeguarding species, ecosystems and local people. There is a desperate search for alternatives, ways to bring the interests of conservation and people's livelihood rights together, so that a united front can be put up against the forces threatening to engulf them both.¹

Unwise use of natural resources of earth and greedy human practices has altered the Earth's environment by changing the land use and land cover (LULC) in the past several centuries. LULC changes are major driving forces for biogeochemical cycles, climate change, and food production from regional to global scales.² Since 1850, LULC change alone has contributed to approximately 35% of anthropogenic carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions across the globe.³ In the 20th century, India has experienced a 6-fold increase in

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population (200 million to 1200 million) coupled with economic growth (especially after the 1950s) that has resulted in LULC transformations.⁴

The rights of tribal and other forest dwelling communities over forests have been alienated through different laws and policies by the state in order to commercially use forest resources. Over time, natural resources began to be exploited to fulfil the demands of alien rulers who did not look at the customary rights of forest dwellers and tribal people. Elwin's ethnographies are peppered with references to the adivasi's love for the forest. Tragically, the forest and game laws introduced by the British had made them interlopers in their own land.⁵

The international law is addressing these national or domestic environmental problems of global significance, through the conservation of biological diversity, protection of natural heritage areas, or promotion of sustainable development by developing multilateral environmental agreements such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on the Protection of the Ozone Layer (Vienna Convention) and their respective protocols, etc. Nature conservation by various international efforts such as, global regulatory regimes and NGOs seeks to provide an appropriate global response for its preservation. The Convention of the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats 1979, in its Preamble paragraph 3 "recognizes that wild flora and fauna constitute a natural heritage of aesthetic, scientific, cultural, recreational, economic and intrinsic value that needs to be preserved and handed on to future generations. The World Charter for environmental protection declares a need for a moral code of action, but it appears intended that the moral obligations are to be owed to other humans rather than to nature itself."⁶

Culture, Ethics and Environmental Consciousness

For millennia the world's indigenous peoples have acted as guardians of the web of life for the next seven generations. They've successfully managed complex reciprocal relationships between biological and cultural diversity. Awareness of indigenous knowledge is re-emerging at the eleventh hour to help avert global ecological and social collapse. Indigenous cultural wisdom shows us how to live in peace—with the earth and one another. It focuses on ancient ways of living from the heart of humanity within the heart of nature as well as explores the convergence of indigenous and contemporary science and the re-indigenization of the world's peoples.⁷

Vedic culture strongly advocates policy of balance between human activities and environment. Natural forces were considered to be expressions of the Lord Himself and are venerable entities. Vedas envisage a beautiful natural environment on earth and command the man not to pollute. There is a command not to degrade the resources of earth. In the

Vedic tradition, it is clearly stated that the life of each species is meant for well-being of all other species all of the 8, 40,000 species on the planet live for each other. Earth and cow are worshipped as mother. In Indian culture most of the animals and plants are worshipped on different occasion. Even poisonous snakes are worshipped on Nagpanchami.

The Vedic religion enshrines a respect for nature, environmental harmony and conservation. The Vedic scholars, instead of caste, creed and regional feelings utter the message "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*" for the human community, which is not available in any other language of the world. Since Vedic times the main motto of social life was "to live in harmony with nature." Therefore trees, animals, hills, mountains, rivers, are worshipped as symbol of reverence to these representative samples of nature. The Hindu religious scriptures reveal the principles for nature conservation as respect and protect nature, Ahinsa and purity of thought and expression.

In India there are many communities residing in diverge geographical and climatic zones. They represent distinct traditions, life-styles, and cultures. However, as usual with the evolution of civilization and modern technology, environment where the primitive groups restored knowledge on flora is rapidly disappearing. These communities are more intimate to the nature and the finding to learn from their ancestors through trial and error, have developed into a complex as well as specific knowledge of their surrounding vegetation, which sustain their lives. There are about 400 large and small tribal communities in India marking about 7.5 percent of the total population of India acquiring about 15 per cent of geographical area.

The most important aspect of these tribal people is that they worship nature. They love forests thereby conserving flora and fauna of the region. The sacred groves are the reservoir of ethno-botanical conservation and also last refuge of endangered plant species. The tribals are popularly herd as the 'guardians' of the forest and its resources. There has to be an understanding so as to how these tribals are associated with the forests and what are their various claims over the same. It also establishes that such relation has a strong legal basis though it is founded mainly on socio-cultural aspects and traditions.

Effects of Forest laws on tribal life

Forests are the only means and source of energy for survival of tribals. They not only consider the forest as one of the most important part of their life but the whole environment per say.⁸ The tribal life and culture are very closely associated with, and protection of environment from exploitative and destructive practices of commercialization, modernization and industrialization as well as it is helpful in protecting environmental biodiversity and rare species. Graham Harvey considers both how indignity is constructed

as a type of environmentalism and how environmentalism is constructed with reference to indignity. Harvey notes how indigenous religious traditions might provide anthologies and practices that are quite different from those with which Westerners relate to the environment.⁹

Traditional societies have much to teach the modern world about conservation and environmental management. E. N. Anderson maintains that the world can escape impending ecological disaster only by embracing a political and ethical transformation that will imbue modern societies with the same shared sense of emotional rationality practiced by traditional cultures.¹⁰

Interestingly, the deforestation rate was relatively greater under the British rule (1880–1950s) and early decades after independence, and then decreased after the 1980s due to government policies to protect the forests. In contrast to forests, cropland area has increased from 92 million ha to 140.1 million ha during 1880–2010. Greater cropland expansion has occurred during the 1950–1980s that coincided with the period of farm mechanization, electrification, and introduction of high yielding crop varieties as a result of government policies to achieve self-sufficiency in food production. The rate of urbanization was slower during 1880–1940 but significantly increased after the 1950s probably due to rapid increase in population and economic growth in India.¹¹

The Indian Forest Act 1865, which came into force during the British period, empowered the Government to declare any land covered with trees as forest land. As a result, the rights of tribal people were constrained in the name of ‘national interest’. The Indian Forest Act 1878 divided forests into three categories - reserve forest, protected forest and village forest. The National Forest Policy 1894 again laid emphasis on the regulation of community rights and restrictions on the privileges previously enjoyed by the villagers in the immediate neighbouring forests. The Government of India Act 1935 consolidated the power of the state on forests so as to meet the requirements of the British industry, military and commerce. By this, forest resources of India during the pre-British era were siphoned off for commercial use by non-tribals and even non-Indians. The process of alienating forest dwellers from the forest was legitimated by the Indian Forest Act and the administrative processes adopted in subsequent periods.¹²

Verrier Elwin himself wrote in 1941: The reservation of forests was a very serious blow to the tribesman. He was forbidden to practice his traditional methods of cultivation. He was ordered to remain in one village and not to wander from place to place. When he had cattle he was kept in a state of continual anxiety for fear they should stray over the boundary and render him liable to heavy fines. If he was a Forest Villager he became liable at any moment to be called to work for the Forest Department. If he lived elsewhere he was forced to obtain a license for almost every kind of forest produce. At every turn the

Forest Laws cut across his life, limiting, frustrating, and destroying his self confidence. During the year 1933–4 there was 27,000 forest offences registered in the Central Provinces and Berar. It is obvious that so great a number of offences would not occur unless the forest regulations ran counter to the fundamental needs of the tribesmen. A Forest Officer once said to me: "Our laws are of such a kind that every villager breaks one forest law every day of his life."¹³

In the post-independent period, the first National Forest Policy of 1952 attempted to redefine the forest policy and traditional rights of forest dwelling tribes. This policy converted certain concessions enjoyed by tribals for long by withdrawing the release of forest land for cultivation, controlling free grazing, and encouraging tribals to do away with the practice of shifting cultivation. Under the 42nd Amendment of the Indian Constitution, the Government of India deleted forests from the State list and entered it under the concurrent list in 1976. This historical injustice was further perpetuated when the Nation adopted Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 and the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980 which identify environmental protection and recognition of the rights of the tribal communities as mutually incompatible objectives.¹⁴

The clear shift was observed by the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution in 1992 and it mandates decentralisation of governance to rural bodies, like panchayats (village councils) and gram sabhas (village assemblies). Through the Provisions of (Panchayati Raj Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 in predominantly tribal ("Scheduled" under the Constitution) areas, the self governance system has been ensured. It confers the ownership and decision-making rights over non-timber forest products (NTFP) to local institutions. It also mandates consultation with local communities i.e., with the gram sabha regarding any developmental and other issues relevant for a site.¹⁵

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 recognises and secures Community Rights or Rights over Community Forest Resources, in addition to their Individual Rights. Recognition of Community Rights is a landmark step which is expected to empower communities to assert their rights over CFR which are critical for their livelihood. The Act also recognises rights of vulnerable tribal groups on forest land and forest resources.¹⁶

Unfortunately official forest and conservation policies ignored two very important aspects that, if taken into account, would have led these policies in a very different direction. Firstly, they did not take on board the long-standing conservation traditions and practices of local communities (and thereby lost an opportunity to enhance, support, and revive community conserved areas and species). Secondly, they ignored the significant economic and cultural dependence of people on the ecosystems and species sought to be conserved

in protected areas (and thereby set the stage for alienation of local people, and conflicts between them and official conservation agencies.¹⁷

Hence, in the present condition, what is required is not the attitude of consumerism and reckless use of natural resources, domination over and exploitation of nature, but responsible use, equitable distribution and preservation of the splendours of nature. Thus, at a time when ecological degradation and deforestation have been taking place at an alarming rate throughout the globe, in India thousands of pockets of natural vegetation scattered throughout the country are preserved almost in pristine condition. Almost all the religious communities and tribal societies consider some plants as holy in origin, and essential in religious functions. The indigenous people all over the world have accumulated knowledge over times, which in traditional set up allow them to live in balance with their environment and this help them to adjust with the natural resources for their livelihood. Further, such knowledge system which is conceptualized as Indigenous knowledge system (IKS) is handed down through oral tradition as well as through various sacred rituals, cultural practice and beliefs in which they remain embodied.¹⁸

Tribals of Chhattisgarh & Environment Conservation

Chhattisgarh is traditionally known from ancient times for its rich floristic diversity and has been mentioned as South Kosala in early Indian literature. Bastar region of Chhattisgarh has been mentioned as the Dandakaranya in the epic Ramayana, and as part of the Kosala kingdom in the Mahabharata. Despite being influenced by various neighbouring and national cultures, the region has maintained its unique identity and is known for its tribal culture. In India, it has been regarded as one of the regions that is predominantly inhabited by tribal communities, confined to rural areas professionally. Most tribal communities prefer living in isolation with their own way of life, customs, traditions, and moral values, and thus have well been able to retain their unique practices and traditional ways of life even today.

The socio-religious practices prevalent among the Gond, Murias, Halba and Maria tribes of Bastar region of Chhattisgarh state are helpful in conservation of plants. This practice of nature conservation is a very ancient tradition and indigenous culture in Bastar as well as in other parts of the country. Due to reverence towards nature, primitive life style, significant dependence on forest products and influence of Hindu doctrine, the local people have conserved about 58 percent of the land area, which is still under forest including sacred groves called Deogudi. Thus, the majority of the area is still covered by forest.

Major scheduled tribes of Chhattisgarh are Gond, Muria, Maria, Dhorla, Bhatra, Halba, and Dhurva, Biaga, Korku, Korba, Pahadi Korba, Saharia, Oran etc. Gonds are the largest tribal group in terms of population. The Gonds of Bastar area are one of the most famous tribes in India, known for their unique Ghotul system of marriages. The Halbas

are mainly farmers and derive their name from the word *hal*, which means plow. The Murias are neat, industrious, and good cultivators who constitute the major bulk of the tribal population and derive their name from *Moolnivasi*, the original inhabitants. There are three categories of Murias – Raj Muria, Ghotul Muria, and Jhoria Muria. The Maria or Madia, derive their name from *madia*, a word mad of the Gondi dialect, which means the hills. Therefore, Madias are mostly from the hills. They have two categories, Abujj Madias and Dandami Madias. Abuj Madias are confined to the Narayanpur district and hills. People of the group that left the hills and inhabit the plains of Bastar, i.e., Bijapur and Dentewada, are called Dandami Madias or Bison Horn Madias. The Bhatras are considered a well advanced tribe of Bastar. The king used to address them as Bhadr (civilized). The Dorlas are mainly confined to Konta and Bhopalpattanam areas. Their dialect Dorli is highly influenced by the Telugu language, suggesting that they probably migrated from the Warangal region of Andhra Pradesh. People of the Dhurva tribe are found mainly in Darbha and Chintgarh areas, and are known for their courage and brave.

The relationship between forest dwellers, particularly tribal/indigenous people and forests, whether in India or elsewhere in the world, is symbiotic by nature. Their co-existence has been considered to be an integral part of their survival and sustainability. This is basically because of geographical, ecological, social, economic, religious and cultural linkages between the people and the forest. Most of these forest dwelling communities are marginal cultivators or shifting cultivators, hunters and gatherers who are not well settled. They enjoy customary rights over natural resources with respect to its use; preservation and its overall management.¹⁹ The tribal people love forests thereby conserving flora and fauna of the region. The sacred groves are the reservoir of ethno-botanical conservation and also last refuge of endangered plant species.

The most primitive mother – goddess as D.D .Kosambi writes, have a raw, literally “forest” about the anionic image. In most cases, this has shrunk to a thicket of shrub a worthless- as fuel; but occasionally, the grove is quite a jungle. Not a single branch of any living tree may be cut in spite of the shortage of firewood; the goddess has consistently refused her permission to those greedy timber contractors who sought to placate her by sacrifice of a goat and offerings of clothes, coconuts, and ornaments.¹⁹ He narrated an interesting custom of Attonga Tribe of Africa where Ila-Ila myth shows that such jungle groves were never to be entered by men, under penalty of transformation into a woman, and punishment for a transgressor by his immediate initiation into the sisterhood and necessity of living thereafter as a woman.²⁰

Madhav Gardil defines sacred groves as tracts of sacred forests which have been completely or nearly completely immune from human interference on grounds of religious beliefs. The nature of religious cults associated with such sacred groves suggests that the

practices are very ancient, deriving from hunting-gathering stages of the society. These sacred groves may range in size from a clump of trees to as much as twenty hectares in area. The largest groves are a veritable treasure-trove for naturalist, supporting many species of plants which are rare in the area. These sacred groves are also often serving as a last refuge for aboriginal birds and mammals.²¹

This state Chhattisgarh is a one of the castle of sacred groves and more than thousand sacred groves are present here. These are apparently distributed in almost all the villages of the Chhattisgarh and dedicated to various male and female deities. The area occupied by the sacred groves in Chhattisgarh is more than 11,000 hac. There are many deities present such as Buddha dev, Lingo dev, Bheema dev, Sarna dev and Mavli Mata, Shitala Mata are major the major Male and Female deities respectively.²²

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The finest sacred groves of India presumably occur in the Bastar and Sarguja region of Chhattisgarh. These groves are locally known as Sarna forests. Here almost every tribal village has a grove. In the mind of tribal people, the world consists not only of human beings, animals and the tangible and visible objects of nature, but also of a multitude of beings that were not normally visible, though on occasion.²³ With increasing deforestation, the sacred groves have become last refuge of many rare plant species having medicinal properties and may prove to be of considerable economic value if properly studies and exploited.²⁴

In Bastar region, sacred groves are locally known as Matagudi, Devgudi and Gaondevi. Different tribes have their own Mata or Gaondevi or goddess in the Devgudi. Some of the deities to whom these groves are dedicated are Andhari Pat, Chala Pachao, Sarna Burhia, Sarna Mata, Mahadania and Budhadev. The 'Gonds' of Bastar felt and contended that the deities were beings of divine dignity. No idol or temple was well defined for them, however the rudiments of idolatry in the worship of un-worked stones and also rudiments of the concept of the temple in the institution of the sacred grave.²⁵

There was however, no erection of a sacred shrine inside a house for the deity among the 'Gond' tribes. The general belief among them was that they were higher in honour than the human beings and hence they should not be housed in human homes at the

same or lower level of their worshipping men and women. They, therefore, install them in shrines i.e. deities on the trees or separate houses for gods. Thus the trees whereon deities reside were considered sacred and were also worshipped as the sacred shrines.²⁶ Hymns were chanted in praise of the deities to invoke and invite them at the shrine for worship. During the worship, animal sacrifice and liquor were essential part of the rituals, and magic and witchcraft predominate.²⁷

The Village priest generally selects the site for establishing a Deogudi and performs 'matri pooja'. The tribals collect herbs, shrubs, climbers and trees used for medicinal uses for plantation in grove areas. This area is protected from fire, grazing and quarrying. The plants and trees, which had fallen due to high wind velocity, are not removed from sacred groves. The regeneration occurs and in some period of time, new plants emerging are found. The wood of fallen trees is utilized for cooking food during religious ceremonies. Some idols are also kept nearby plants and they represent a particular god/ goddess.²⁸

The religion of the Maria centres round the earth, the state and the clan. On the outskirts of the village will be found the shrine of the village mother and in a grove nearby there may be the temple of one of the clan Gods.²⁹ The deities of Nagesia tribe reside in Sarna, a grove of Sal trees. It is here that these deities are mostly worshipped. Supernatural fear prevents the people from cutting of the trees of the Sarna.³⁰ In a few Muria villages, there are no temples. In Almer, there is nothing but a few stone seats under saja trees, where the village Mother is worshipped and the New Eating ceremonies performed. In Kajen the village Mother forbade the erection of any shrine.³¹ Bara Deo has always been regarded as the chief deity of the Baiga and Gond. Bura Deo, who is supposed to reside in a saj tree, he is worshipped in the month of Jeth (May), when goats, fowl, coconuts, and the liquor of the new mahua crop are offered to him. He lived in an anthill.³² The important Gods and Goddesses of the Dorla tribals are commonly included in their pantheon are - Mutta-lemma, Gamam, Kora, Ganga namma and Murpu. They are enshrined within the settlement; sometimes a few of them viz., Kora and Ganganamma are found to be placed in the outskirt jungle. All these Gods and Goddesses are found commonly in almost all the Dorla villages. They are worshipped regularly on important festivals and religious functions. They are enshrined under some trees like saja, mahua, semur, tendu etc. Except gamam and Murpu, all others are represented by some stones, usually flat in nature. Except Gamam, all these are thought to be of female sex. Though most of them are worshipped in important religious festivals, some specific festivals are associated with some of them.³³

Apart from these, there are other minor gods i.e. Thakur Deo (Male Guardian deity of village) Hulera-Pen (protector of the cattle); Matiya Pen (devil or whirlwind); Narayan Pen (Sun god); Kodapen (Horse god); Maswasi Pen (hunting god); Kanya (Watery Spirits) etc.

Tribals associated with these groves have a deep faith in the deity resides in the groves. They believe that the deity will protect their community and forest. People also believe that the deity would be offended, if anybody causes damage to the plants and animals in such places. The deities worshipped Admara, Amalodaka, Bhumhunga, Bhumi Hiria, Chingraj, Kondraj, Raopan, Tikapraj, Mudia, Lord Vidhyadharan, Lord Btarma, Lord Brahaspati, lord Siva, Serpen King, and lord Narayan. These deities resemble plants such as Haldu, Neem, Semal, Suplhi, Nimbu, Madar. Bargad, Pipal, Mahua, aam, Tulsi, arjuna, Sal etc. are planted and it believed that gods reside in them.³⁴

Tribals have a magico-religious belief that gods/goddess residing in these sacred groves will curse or ruin the tribal clan if the trees related to them are not maintained. Thus, these sacred groves played a vital role in conservation of plant in tribal region of Bastar. In Bastar region, many Teaak, Arjun, Sehara, Imli, Kulu, Kumbi, Karanj, Kala Siris, Kala Tendu, Neem etc are found. The Important shrubs and herbs are Chirayata, Satavar, Sarpagandha, Saphed Musli, Van Haldi, Jangli Piyaz, Bajradanti, Amaltas, Brahmi, Shankpushpi, Nirgundi and large numbe of medicinal herbal plants are found in the Bastar.³⁵

The tribal communities also comprises of several cultures, traditions, festivals & rituals associated with these groves. They had constructed many temples of the female deity of that locality and nearby forest such as 'Shitala Mata', 'Silpat Mata', 'Kankalin Mata' and conduct many prayers and religious ceremonies on different occasions in these temples.³⁶

Tribal people of Chhattisgarh also perform many rituals of 'Aama tihar', 'Aama Jogani' i.e. the praying of many trees and sacrament is conducted beneath the trees like *Mangifera indica* and 'Bhaji jogani' i.e. the prayer conducted for the deity and after this ritual farmers use to plant the Gram or 'Bhaji' in their farm field. They also utilize this forest fragments and their produce like collection of honey, fruits, roots and medicinal plants. And they also drink juice of *Caryota urens* (sulphi) and *Phoenix sylvestris* (chind) which is a very good energy booster and stimulator.³⁷

These groves are protected on the belief of the local deity residing in that place. The name of the god, goddess or the deity of the grove is given by the tribals or the community people of that grove. Many groves are located inside the forest and some of them are near village, some of them are also found on the Highland or Plateau region and they still remain fairly inaccessible by road. Their festivals, marriage ceremonies, fairs, rituals and other cultural aspects are closely associated with these groves. Most of the jungles which have been disappeared from our state are however protected in these sacred groves due to religious & traditional beliefs. This belief of sacred grove had played a vital role in protecting and conserving the forest. This is also a unique repository in conserving

unique, rare & endangered species of both flora & fauna. This also maintains the biodiversity of our country & state.³⁸

The village grove was also the refuge of the dispossessed spirits. Every tree possesses a spirit, as the tribal lore emphasizes, and even today the tribesman formally seeks the permission of the spirit of the tree before applying his axe to it. Sacrifices are offered to sacred trees, and votive offerings are hung on their branches.³⁹

Tribals of Bastar celebrate many festivals associated with the forest and environment. In Navakhai festival, tribals worship Buddha Dev and offer him new grains of the season. When there is no rain or less rain, the villagers pray Bheema Dev for rain. Madai mela is celebrated in the month of Magh. A fair is conducted by the villagers and villagers take their deity to this fair and people use to wear new clothes and worship their deity known as "Sharna devi". The festival of Maati tyohar is celebrated in the Bastar at the month of May end. In this festival people used to take out the seed which are sown and also used to sown the Rice seed. Here, Maati dev is the main deity, present and usually celebrated by all the tribes of this area.⁴⁰ In Aama Jogani, villagers use to conduct the prayer in the month of April and only then, they use to plug the fruit when there is proper flowering and fruit is mature in the Mango tree. Before, this plugging of mango from the tree is strictly restricted. Silpat mata is treated as the Deity of the village and any special work is started only after her prayer. Prayer to this deity is conducted in the Chaitra i.e. on the Month of the March-April. Tribals after praying to this deity start their marriage function. Patangudi mata is worshipped in sacred groves in the month of Feb- March and offer eggs and goat. Tribals believe that Sarna Dev is the deity of the village. Any kind of activities like Thinning, pruning of the trees are prohibited in this area. Any important work is started after their worship and in worshipping the Betel leaf, nuts of Areca catechu, Joss stick and Hadiya (a liquor made up of Rice) etc are dedicated to the deity. This whole work of worship is done by Baiga (local priest) any kind of religious works are also done by the priest.⁴¹ There are some other festivals associated with nature like Hareli, Hola, Sarhul, Bastar Dushera etc.

Threats to Sacred Groves.

Today, the rapid growth of industrialization and urbanization is leading to the establishment of industries, townships in remote areas. Dams are built and roads are widened to join the highways. Mountains are dug up for mining purposes. Such activity has caused a large number of sacred groves to be destroyed and felled down.

Another threat is encroachments by migrating communities. There are instances where outside communities encroach into the sacred grove area. They do not harbour the

same sentiment as the local people and view the grove more as an area to obtain resources rather than an abode of the gods.

In several areas, it has been observed that the government does not place much value on the traditional management of the sacred groves by the local communities. Thus, the forest department takes over the area and commercial forestry operations are allowed to develop. The local people then lose their customary rights of forest management.

Many ancient trees are surviving till date due to the sacred belief and worship. However, in the past heavy inflow of tourists around sacred groves, threatened their very existence. Loss in faith and religious conversions in general has further intensified the magnitude of erosion of beliefs and value system.

Last but not the least, there is no effective legislation for forest grove. Though there are several Acts for protection of Biodiversity, Forests, and Wildlife – nowhere are sacred groves mentioned in any section as a separate unit for special protection by the law. As a result, many owners are free to sell, cut and deplete the grove at will.

Conclusion

I conclude with the words that for providing necessary protection to forest and thereby animals, rare medicinal plants and flora- fauna of the region, it is imperative that cooperation of the tribal people should be extended. The surrounding village communities need to be educated and guided for protection of animals and plants. Legislation by the state government against cutting of sacred grove should be forcefully implemented. We therefore need immediate measures to stop the destruction of sacred groves and start their conservation as being an integral part of the social and cultural life in rural India.

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