

THE AGE-OLD RELEVANCE OF THE ETHICS AND ECOLOGY OF SACRED GROVES IN MANIPUR – AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Sacred groves are a group of trees or a patch of vegetation protected by the local people through religious and cultural practices. These sacred groves not only serve as a store house of diverse group of flora and fauna but also provide a continued delivery of ecosystem services for the welfare of the surrounding community. This paper reviews the sacred groves' inextricable link between the present society of Manipur to the past in terms of biological diversity, cultural, religious and ethnic heritage. Sacred groves have been serving as a valuable tool for biodiversity conservation. But people's changing attitudes, erosion of traditional beliefs and human impact have caused degradation of sacred groves over the years. This article draws attention to the current status, threats and formulation of long-term conservation goals taking into confidence the different stakeholders to revive this unique conservation effort.

Key Words: Sacred groves, ecosystem services, biological diversity, cultural, religious, ethnic heritage.

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INTRODUCTION:

In recent times, there has been an increased concern about the loss of biodiversity throughout the world. Not only is the climate changing but also societal demands and preferences for goods and services that are changing drastically within short period altering the social environment. Religion has played a vital role in human society. Connecting things with faith is the easiest way to obtain society's support for a good cause. Sacred groves are the best example of connecting nature with faith (Kulkarni 119). It is believed that the existence of sacred groves dates back several thousands of years when human society was in the primitive stage of development. The concept of maintaining virgin forest is described in the vedic literature and thus dates back to pre-vedic period, i.e., about 3000 to 5000 years B.C. In India, sacred groves do not enjoy protection via federal legislation. However, the introduction of the protected area category community reserves under the Wildlife Protection Amendment Act of 2002 has introduced legislation for providing government protection to community held lands, which could include sacred groves.

Sacred groves are a group of trees or a patch of vegetation protected by the local people through religious and cultural practices. The scientific community today recognises this tradition as one of the dogma of sustainable use of natural resources. The spiritual ties that human established with these sacred groves ensured not only the long-term subsistence interest of local people but also protected the dynamics of local ecosystems. (Ray *et al* 21). Since time immemorial, sacred groves have been in existence and are considered to be the relic of the original forest vegetation of a region. Over the past one decade or so, considerable amount of interest has been generated in the studies of sacred groves among the ecologists, taxonomists, foresters, environmentalists and

anthropologists (Ekka 159, Upadhyay 590, Kushalappa and Raghavendra 266, Ghosh, Lyngwi and Joshi 474). But little information is available of sacred groves of Manipur and their relevance in terms of religious beliefs, cultural ethos and ecological significance (Khan and Khumbongmayum 277, Khumbongmayum *et al* 1541). The present paper reviews the sacred groves of Manipur highlighting their importance to the environment as well as society and pointing out the possible threats. The information will be helpful to find ways to uphold this age-old traditional concept of biodiversity conservation which has long been a boon in disguise that has been passed on from our forefathers.

ETHICS AND ECOLOGY OF SACRED GROVES

In the state of Manipur which is included in one of the 36 hotspots regions of the world under the Indo-Myanmar region (Fig. 1), the secret of maintaining the ecology and environment has been found in our culture, traditions, *Puyas* (old scriptures), myth, religion, belief and folklore, etc. There were stories in which human beings were incarnated as trees, birds, animals and other species. Sangai (*Rucervus eldi eldi*) the State animal and Nongin (*Syrmaticus humie humie*) the State bird are some of the example. There has been binding advices of the elders not to cut

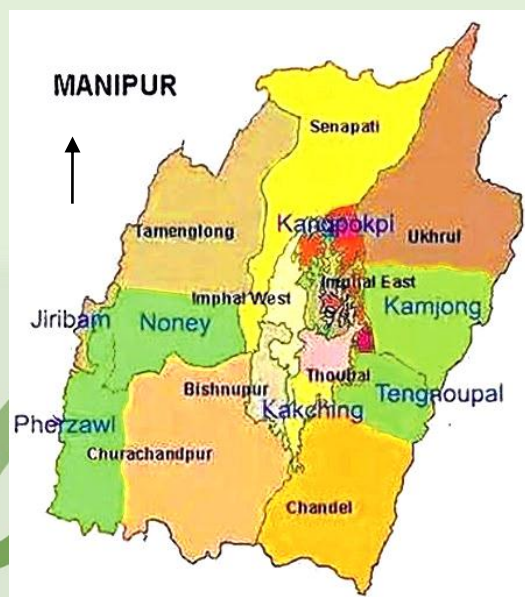


Figure-1: Geographical Map of Manipur Valley.

certain types of trees and not to kill animals like snake, tiger, etc. in certain situations. Till today, elderly people follow the practice of cutting big trees only after offering prayer. (Singh 4). As any other people of early society, the Meiteis too were animists investing natural objects like the hills, rivers, lakes, open meadows, dark forests, old trees, lightening, fire, etc. But what they mainly worshipped were clan or local deities and those believed to guarding the cardinal points, generally known as *Umang Lai* (sacred deities or sylvan deities) or *Umang Lai Khubams* (Sacred groves). A ritual festival is still

continuing in its full spirit annually in the name of Lai Haraoba performed by amaibas and amaibis (priests and priestesses). (Singh 81)

In Manipur, there is a record of 166 inventoried sacred groves, even though more than 418 sacred groves are listed in the Working Plan document of Forest Department. The size of the sacred groves ranges from a small clump of trees to a few acres. They are a tract of virgin forest that harbour rich biodiversity and a repository of rare and endemic species which has been left untouched and protected by the local inhabitants due to the belief that the deities reside in these forests. (Khumbongmayum *et al* 21). According to Khan and Khumbongmayum, many medicinal plants used by the local community are found to be growing around these sacred groves which are used for treating variety of ailments by local practitioners. (277). More importantly, these groves have been providing an array of ecosystem services like soil, water and biodiversity conservation, nutrient cycling, carbon sequestration and temperature regulation. Many sacred groves contain pristine vegetation which argour well with the flora and fauna associated with them. Wherever the sacred groves existed, the indigenous traditional communities who have a spiritual bonding with their physical environment always sustain them (De 14).

THREATS TO SACRED GROVES AND CURRENT STATUS

Today, the necessity of natural resources sustainability for human survival has given way to traditional laws and practices. The sacred groves have multiple disturbance factors like anthropogenic pressure, pollution, urbanization, soil erosion, logging, agriculture, conversion of forest into land and road construction, fencing, silviculture, invasion, overgrazing, encroachment, developing industries, shifting social and cultural perspectives which have gnawed away their survival. (Chanda and Ramachandra 29).

According to Singh, our forefathers have accumulated much knowledge from their past experiences, lore, belief and taboos thereby keeping the sanctum sanctorum of the sacred groves intact. But,

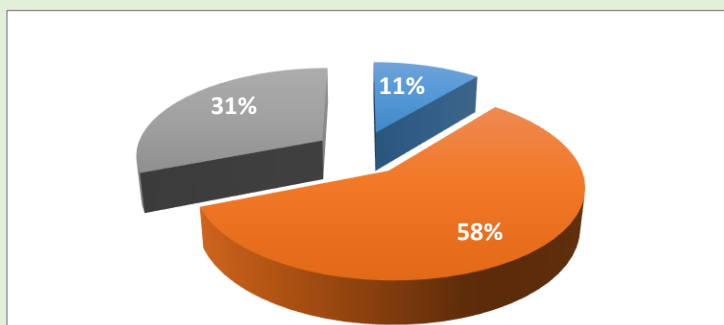


Figure-2: Current status of sacred groves of Manipur

nowadays it is quite evident that the accumulated knowledge are being forgotten and some of them have been lost before being able to fathom its relevance to the changing society and development of the State (4). Among the inventoried sacred groves of Manipur, only a few are well preserved (11%), while most are partly threatened (58%) and others threatened (31%). (Khumbongmayum *et al* 430, Fig. 2). Many of the plants that represented as keystone species have now vanished from the surrounding locality due to anthropogenic and other allied activities. Trees and plants like pipal (*Ficus religiosa*), neem (*Azadirachta indica*), bamboo (*Bambusa* sp.), banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*), jamun (*Syzygium cumini*), silver oak (*Grevillea robusta*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), tamarind (*Tamarindus indicus*), jackfruit (*Artocarpus lacucha*), amla (*Emblica officinalis*), plantain (*Musa paradisiaca*), etc. had provided a niche for large number of small animals. The understory flora comprising of naturally occurring plants like dhatura (*Datura* spp.), ghas (*Cynodon dactylon*), etc. required in ritual worship have undergone a sharp decline in their regeneration potential (Chandrasekhara 143, Jaryan *et al* 101, Panda *et al* 10).

Long years of neglect, habitat fragmentation, migration, immigration of people, introduction of exotic species in restoration process and encroachment of sacred grove areas by various government departments in the name of developmental activities also have a pivotal part in the decrepitude of these groves. (Ray, Amirthalingam 64) According to Mitu De, a matter of grave concern is the steady erosion of traditional and cultural values among the local communities that has affected the conservation and preservation of these groves, which were once highly revered and maintained.

Day by day, the rich cultural heritage of the region seems to be losing its significance along with the degradation of the sacred groves. The very sacred groves are now fast deteriorating under the influence of rapid socio-economic transformation and materialistic attitude. Therefore, it is imperative to formulate certain effective conservation strategies for management and protection of these sacred groves. A major stakeholder group should be the local indigenous community by taking them into confidence for future sustainable management of the sacred groves. Moreover, younger generations should be made aware by inculcating in them the importance of the

protection and conservation of sacred groves both as a part of their traditional knowledge and through newer scientific approaches to biodiversity conservation. In the recent past, there is a growing awareness among the environmentally conscious communities and civil societies. They have taken up this cause in right earnest and the trend is being reversed.

CONCLUSION

Over the years, sacred groves have been observed to bear the brunt of exploitation at different levels. Therefore, a synthesis between the traditional knowledge and the modern scientific know-how with active participation of the local community under relevant acts and laws is worth considering for evolving a mechanism for the effective conservation of the sacred groves. Anthropogenic factors should also be regulated in the scenario of changing environment, so that, any further degradation of the sacred groves can be prevented.

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