

Traditional Environmental Governance and Sacred Grooves: A Case Study of the Law Lyngdoh Nonglait Sacred Forest in Meghalaya

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Abstract: *Sacred or protected groves are virgin forest areas that hold significant cultural and spiritual value for local communities. Globally, these groves have been preserved for various reasons, including religious practices, burial grounds, and watershed conservation. Such practices have led to the protection of rich biodiversity within these forests. Sacred groves exemplify a long - standing tradition of environmental conservation rooted in indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. These groves often house numerous endemic, endangered, and rare species, maintaining the ecological balance and serving as a natural biodiversity reservoir. Local communities have historically conserved these groves, believing that disturbing them would offend deities and bring misfortune. This symbiotic relationship between humans and nature highlights the groves importance as a cultural, religious, and environmental heritage.*

Keywords: Sacred groves, biodiversity, indigenous conservation, cultural heritage, environmental protection

1. Introduction

Sacred/protected groves are tracts of virgin forests that have cultural or spiritual significance for the people who live around them. They have been protected by communities around the world for a variety of reasons, including religious practices, burial grounds and water shed value. As a result of this, the rich biodiversity of these forests are protected. Sacred groves represent a long tradition of environmental conservation based on indigenous knowledge by the tribal communities. They are among the few least disturbed forest patches which are serving as the natural treasure house of biodiversity and a refuge for a large number of endemic, endangered and rare taxa. In these forests cutting of trees, plucking of flowers, fruits, twigs are not allow and it is believed that if done so, the deity would be offended and cause bad situations and experiences to befall humankind. Various rites and rituals are performed periodically in these forests.

There are numerous ways in which communities interact with and protect their natural environment. The practice of preserving forests or groves is one such approach. Forests are important to human habitat because they are a source of sustenance. They provide food, fibre, freshwater and construction materials for subsistence as well as cash income and act as a 'safety net' in times of hardship (Tiwari et. al.: 2010: 329). Communities dwelling in or near forests have in the past ensured that rich and diverse forest areas are preserved and protected. Close proximity to these resources and their constant utilisation have enabled traditional communities to develop an understanding of the conservation and sustainable utilisation of forests. This knowledge is expressed in the diverse cultural practices of the local people and forms part of their human heritage (*Ibid.*).

Sacred groves (also referred to as sacred forests) which have evinced deep ecological interest are a well known conservation practice prevalent across the world. In addition to being one of the finest instances of traditional conservation

practices, sacred groves have also formed centres of cultural and religious life for people over much of the old world (Gadgil and Chandran: 1992: 183). Sacred groves are referred to as community conserved areas that often have associated limitations on activities within the forest (Ormsby: 2011: 783). These groves or forests are conserved by local residents for a variety of reasons, ranging from belief in a forest deity to protection of a spring or as sacred space where ancestors are buried (*Ibid.*). The practice of assigning a patch of forest as the abode of gods or goddesses is not new. The societies of Greece, Roman, Asia and Africa had long preserved sections of the natural environment as sacred groves to gods and goddesses. Gadgil and Chandran (1992: 183) observe that traditional societies with remarkable systems of resource management existed in different countries, regions or cultures like ancient Sumeria, Ottoman Empire, Japan, Amerindian, 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 (*Ibid.*). Another study (Chandrashekar & Sankar: 1998: 166) further observes that at the global level sacred groves have been reported from African and Asian countries like Nigeria, Syria, Turkey, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. In the Kerinci Valley of Sumatra, sacred village forests fulfill a range of functions – utilitarian, economical, religious, social and environmental (Aumeeruddy & Bakels: 1994: 39).

Khan et. al. (2008: 277) note that since time immemorial conservation of natural resource has been an integral part of diverse cultures in different ways. The traditional worship practices show the symbiotic relation of human beings and nature. Indigenous communities all over the world lived in harmony with the nature and conserved its valuable biodiversity. A good example of such traditional practices is the conservation and protection of small forest patches by dedicating them to the local deities by various indigenous communities of the world. Such forest patches are called "sacred groves". Sacred groves are the tracts of virgin forest that were left untouched by the local inhabitants, harbour rich biodiversity and are protected by the local people due to their

cultural and religious beliefs and taboos that the deities reside in them. Sacred groves provide the inextricable link between present society to the past in terms of biodiversity, culture, religious and ethnic heritage. The existence of sacred groves has been reported in many parts of Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia and America. Groves are also reported from Ghana, Nigeria, Syria, Turkey and Japan. A document of MAB (1995) has described the sacred groves present in Ghana, Senegal, and Sumatra. Several small size sacred groves were reported from Nepal. Various sacred sites associated with rich vegetation in Bangladesh were reported. The Dubla Island sacred grove in Sundarbans mangrove forest in Bangladesh harbours rich vegetation and is a place of worship for low caste Hindus, who visit it once in a year for prayer. In Afghanistan, after advent of Islam, the creation and conservation of sacred grove became a part of historical and geographical tradition of the rural people. The positive role of sacred groves in the socioeconomic and cultural lives of many rural folks in Ghana has been possible because of the collective efforts of people to protect them (*Ibid.*: 278 - 279).

The practice of setting aside patches of forest land and leaving them intact on the grounds of religious belief of the traditional communities has been the practice for centuries in India. Indian society comprises several cultures each with its own set of traditional methods of conserving nature and its creatures. Sacred groves are found all over India especially in those regions where indigenous communities inhabit (Khan et. al.: 2008: 279). Despite the influence of other cultures a large number of sacred groves remained in the country. In India the earliest documented work on sacred grove is that of the first Inspector General of Forests, D. Brandis in 1897. Brandis had this to say about sacred groves:

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 Malwan, 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. . . (Gadgil and Chandran: 1992: 184).

Research work on various aspects related to sacred groves in India gained momentum during the 1970s. Gadgil and Vartak traced the historical link of sacred groves with the pre - agricultural, hunting and gathering stage, before human beings had settled down to raise livestock or till land (Khan et. al.: 2008: 280).

Most of the sacred groves reported from India are in the Western Ghats, North Eastern India and Central India. Sacred groves were found to exist in the states of Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka, Odisha and Tamil Nadu. In North - east India most of the sacred groves has been reported from Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Manipur. Sacred mangroves, experiencing little or no damage at all, with some religious significance, were reported from Rann of Kutch, Maharashtra, Goa, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal (Khan et.

al.: 2008: 281). Sacred groves are also found in tribal dominated areas and are known by different names in ethnic terms. They are protected and managed by local people on religious grounds and traditional beliefs. Wherever the sacred groves existed, the indigenous traditional societies, which have a spiritual relationship with their physical environment, sustain them. These areas are also key reservoirs of biodiversity. About 4215 sacred groves covering an area of 39, 063 hectares were estimated to be distributed in India (*Ibid.*) Another estimate states that that in India there are over 100, 000 groves, their names varying according to different regions and languages (Ormsby: 2011: 783). Although there has been no comprehensive survey of the sacred groves in the entire country approximately 13, 720 sacred groves have been documented so far (Malhotra et. al.: 2001: 12).

Table 1: Terminology of Sacred Groves in India

| S. No. | State/Region | Name |
|--------|------------------|---|
| 1 | Bihar | <i>Sarnas</i> |
| 2 | Himachal Pradesh | <i>Dev van</i> |
| 3 | Karnataka | <i>Devarakadu</i> |
| 4 | Kerala | <i>Kavu</i> |
| 5 | Madhya Pradesh | <i>Dev</i> |
| 6 | Maharashtra | <i>Deorais, Deovani, Devarai or Devrahati</i> |
| 7 | Manipur | <i>Lai Umang</i> |
| 8 | Rajasthan | <i>Oran</i> |
| 9 | Tamil Nadu | <i>Sarpa Kavu</i> |
| 10 | Odisha | <i>Jaheera, Thakurnam</i> |
| 11 | Meghalaya | <i>Law Kyntang</i> |

Source: Alison A. Ormsby (2011). U. M. Chandrashekara & S. Sankar (1998).

Most of the sacred groves are managed by community groups and not by government agencies. Such groves are often private or community land and not formal protected areas or parks. The management and ownership of these groves varies from state to state and there are different approaches even within states (Ormsby: 2011: 784). For example, in Kerala the management of sacred groves is undertaken by individual families, groups of families or statutory agencies for temple management (Chandrashekara and Sankar: 1998: 166). Another study in the Kodagu District of the State of Karnataka noted that two types of management systems existed, sacred groves were either family - owned or community - managed (Chandrakanth et al.: 2004: 102). The size of the sacred groves varies greatly from small plots less than one hectare to larger tracts of hundreds of hectares. In some cases, these fragments represent the sole remaining natural forests outside of protected areas and may be key reservoirs of biodiversity. Sacred forests are known to conserve habitats that are not represented in the current protected area system and serve as refuge for endemic species. These have been reported to be relic forests and may be the only remaining climax vegetation of an area, although many are now disturbed as a result of human actions (Ormsby: 2013: 187).

1) Law Lyngdoh Sacred Forest, Nonglait

Area under Study

The area under study, the *Law Lyngdoh Nonglait* Sacred Forest lies at the confluence of three villages - Nonglait, Mawkyllai and Lawbyrtun. Located in the Mawthadrashian

C&RD Block of West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya, the three villages are dominated by the Nonglait Clan who forms the majority of the population.

a) Nonglait Village

Nonglait Village, with population of 1003 is located in Mawthadraishan C&RD Block in West Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya. The District head quarter, Nongstoin is 44 Km away from the village.

Demographics: The village is home to 1003 people, among them 519 (52%) are male and 484 (48%) are female. 1% of the whole population are from general caste and 99% are Scheduled Tribe. Child (aged under 6 years) population of Nonglait village is 25%, among them 52% are boys and 48% are girls. There are 171 households in the village and an average 6 persons live in every family.

Table 7: Population of Nonglait Village

| | Total | General | Schedule Caste | Schedule Tribe | Child |
|--------|-------|---------|----------------|----------------|-------|
| Total | 1,003 | 10 | 0 | 993 | 247 |
| Male | 519 | 7 | 0 | 512 | 129 |
| Female | 484 | 3 | 0 | 481 | 118 |

Sources: Govt. of India Census, 2011

Literacy: Total 711 people in the village are literate, among them 366 are male and 345 are female. Literacy rate (children under 6 are excluded) of Nonglait is 94%. 94% of male and 94% of female population are literate.

b) Lawbyrtun Village

Lawbyrtun Village, with population of 1344 is located in Mawthadraishan C&RD Block in West Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya. The District head quarter, Nongstoin is 44 Km away from the village.

Demographics: The village is home to 1344 people, among them 716 (53%) are male and 628 (47%) are female. 5% of the whole population are from general caste and 95% are Scheduled Tribe. Child (aged under 6 years) population of Lawbyrtun village is 24%, among them 49% are boys and

51% are girls. There are 240 households in the village and an average 6 persons live in every family.

Table 8: Population of Lawbyrtun Village

| | Total | General | Schedule Caste | Schedule Tribe | Child |
|--------|-------|---------|----------------|----------------|-------|
| Total | 1,344 | 69 | 0 | 1,275 | 322 |
| Male | 716 | 38 | 0 | 678 | 157 |
| Female | 628 | 31 | 0 | 597 | 165 |

Sources: Govt. of India Census, 2011

Literacy: Total 823 people in the village are literate, among them 437 are male and 386 are female. Literacy rate (children under 6 years are excluded) of Lawbyrtun is 81%. 78% of male and 83% of female population are literate.

c) Mawkyllei Village

Mawkyllei Village, with population of 1168 is located in Mawthadraishan C&RD Block in West Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya. The District head quarter, Nongstoin is 44 Km away from the village.

Demographics: The village is home to 1168 people, among them 571 (49%) are male and 597 (51%) are female. 1% of the whole population are from general caste and 99% are Scheduled Tribe. Child (aged under 6 years) population of Mawkyllei village is 24%, among them 49% are boys and 51% are girls. There are 183 households in the village and an average 6 persons live in every family.

Literacy: Total 714 people in the village are literate, among them 328 are male and 386 are female. Literacy rate (children under 6 are excluded) of Mawkyllei is 81%. 76% of male and 85% of female population are literate here.

Table 9: Population of Mawkyllei Village

| | Total | General | Schedule Caste | Schedule Tribe | Child |
|--------|-------|---------|----------------|----------------|-------|
| Total | 1,168 | 6 | 0 | 1,162 | 283 |
| Male | 571 | 4 | 0 | 567 | 140 |
| Female | 597 | 2 | 0 | 595 | 143 |

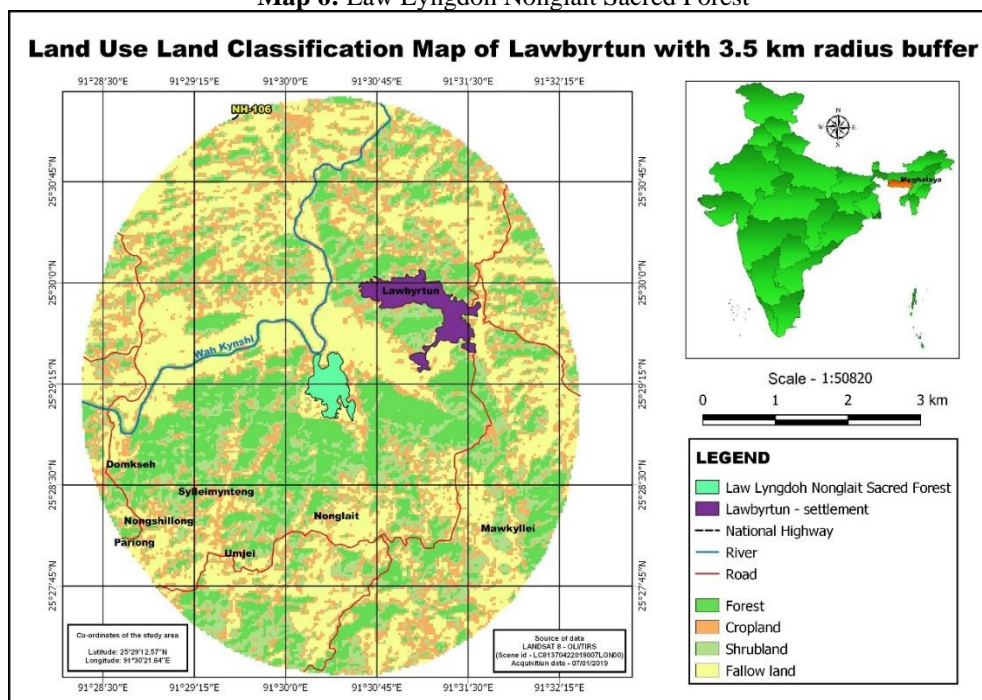
Sources: Govt. of India Census, 2011





Figure 18: Law Lyngdoh Nonglait Sacred Forest

Map 6: Law Lyngdoh Nonglait Sacred Forest



Established, owned and managed by the Nonglait Clan, the affairs of the *Law Lyngdoh* Sacred Forest and other clan related matters are administered by the Nonglait clan under the headship of *U Basan Kur* (Clan Chief). The Law Lyngdoh Sacred Forest measures about 10.6 hectares. The Villages under the Nonglait Clan administration include Nonglait, Lawbyrtun, Mawkyllei, Tieh Nongbah and Markham. Apart from the Sacred Forest, the Clan also owns *Ka Khlaw Lai Kur* (Forest of three mother clan - *Kliew*, *Sngap* and *Jahsain*) and the Pine Forest (started under the Chieftanship of Basan Kur Hopingstone Lyngdoh Nonglait, one of the political stalwarts of Meghalaya) at Tieh Nongbah Village. The traditional system of administration in the Nonglait clan comprises of:

Clan Administration (Interview 1 and 2):

- The clan council, *ka Dorbar Kur Pyllun* – this clan council comprises of only the male nominated members from the five villages under the Clan administration. The head of the Clan, the *Basan Kur*, is elected by the Clan council based on a voice vote. The *Basan Kur* must belong to the Clan. In case of a no clear cut majority, voting by secret ballot is held.

- The *Basan Kur* is given a plot of land and a paddy field as remuneration. However, he must return the property once he ceases to be the *Basan Kur*.
- The Clan has its own Constitution called *Ka Riti Pyniaid Kur* to administer the affairs under the Clan and its forest management.
- The Executive Committee: The Executive Committee of the Clan is headed by the Basan Kur who is the ex - officio Head of the Committee. The other members include:
 - Secretary
 - Treasurer
 - Forest Caretakers (2)
 - Members: 22 in all from the five villages under the clan administration.
- Inter - caste marriage with the mainland people is prohibited within the clan. However, there is no restriction for marriages among the tribals of North - East.

Forest Management:

- All the three forest mentioned earlier are owned by the Nonglait Clan.

- The management of the protected forest is taken by the Executive Committee under the guidance (*jingpyniaid*) of the Dorbar Kur. Though no written records were to be found, according to the clan elders, the institution of the protected grove has been in existence for not less than a hundred years. The practice of maintaining this grove is an indigenous institution which has the effect of conserving forest areas by local inhabitants. The protected forest has strong cultural and traditional values associated with it. It is a traditional nature conservation practice which can also be found throughout the world.
 - The Clan has its Forest Management Committee headed by the *Basan Kur* and the two Caretakers.
 - The Forest is looked after by a Chief Caretaker and an Assistant who is appointed by the Clan. The Remuneration for the caretaker is paid out of the clan treasury.
 - Cutting and burning of Trees are strictly prohibited. Plucking of Forest products like fruits, wild flowers, etc. are strictly prohibited. No forest products are allowed to be taken from the forest. Hunting of animals and birds is strictly prohibited.
 - The traditional religious rituals are no longer practiced in the forest. However, there is a belief that spirits resides in the forest and as such it is being considered sacred by members of the Clan.
 - The youth are always encouraged to voice their opinion and suggestions. For example, the ban on hunting is a suggestion given by the youth.
 - A private individual may be given permission to manage and conserve the clan forest. However, he must return the land to the clan after a period of time.
 - The Village administration has no say in the Forest Management.
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