

Sacred Groves; Traditional Conservation of Plant Diversity in Nallamala Forest Range Tribes of Prakasham District (Andhra Pradesh)

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Abstract: Tribal people of Nallamala forest are closely associated in different ways with the surrounding forest and its resources mainly plants and animals for their common and simple life style. These people no doubt they have good knowledge of their local resources. A large number of plant leaves, fruits nuts and bark of different trees have been used in the traditional health care. Some plants are not only used for food but also for shelter. This research is mainly focused on tribal believes and religious bound on some trees and fruits they believe that some plants have super natural powers and they safe gourd their life and nature.

Keywords: Sacred Grove

1. Introduction Sacred Groves

Ancient people were intimate with the surroundings. They so often weaved themselves into the tapestry of life surrounding them so, exquisitely that we can only admire their sensitivity and their wisdom. The ancient generation gave importance to trees and forests, and they worshipped and protected these forests and trees. The protection of patches of forest as sacred groves and several tree species as sacred trees belong to the religion based conservation ethos of ancient people all over the world. Sacred lands are found everywhere around the world. Conservation of biodiversity is the idea conveyed by sacred groves. Sacred Oak grove was present in Nallamala forest. Sacred mountains and lakes are present in Nallamala. Many tribal people honored sacred groves. Most of the sacred groves have disappeared and few remain today. However, some of them have been passed down generations and the hills of the North Eastern Region of Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh, India are one instance where pristine groves relatively undisturbed by man, are found even today. The sacred groves have well developed forest ecosystems and high degree of species richness and a rich biodiversity in general, depending on extend of preservation of the grove. The history of the sacred grove, it is seen that, it was mentioned from very early days. In our great epic 'Mahabharata' divine forest and 'Upavanas' re mentioned at many instances. Similarly, our great poet Kalidasa's creation 'Vikramorvesheyam' specifically points the presence of divine forest. In Christianity Lord God created a wonderful forest called Eden Garden. Indian society is an unbelievable mixture of different cultures and traditions. Each society has its own life style. Many of these societies or cultures have traditionally developed strategies of conserving and managing nature and the natural resource. In our religion and culture there is a lot of emphasis on forests and their conservation. The role of sacred groves in conservation of Biodiversity has long been recognized (Kosambi, 1962, Gadgil and Vartak, 1976; Haridasan and Rao, 1985; Khan et al. 1997). The sacred conservation practices followed by local people have come into focus, of

late, due to the importance for protecting several delicate ecosystems and threatened species, the explicit connections they show between culture and biological diversity, and their potential of people oriented conservation efforts. Forest, mountain peaks and hillocks, rivers and steam beds, ponds and grass lands are left aside or their use strictly regulated due to faith of fear associated with the deity. The sacred groves are not mere physical entities. They reflect the value system of communities. The dynamics of the sacred groves can be related to the changes taking place in the socio cultural realms of the society. Many scholars have been working on conservation of sacred groves through Socio-Culture practices in different parts of India (Gadgil and Vartak, 1975 and 1976); Boojn and Ramakrishnin, 1983; Khiewtam and Ramakrishnan, 1989; Rodgers; 1994; Kinget al., 1997; Sinha and Maikhuri, 1998; Sunitha and Rao; 1999). Ethno-botanists and anthropologists are debating the role of sacred groves as conservation mechanism of the communities. Sacred groves are a biological heritage and a system that has helped to preserve the representative genetic resources existing in the surrounding regions for generations.

2. Study Area

The middle section of the Eastern Ghat felling almost in the middle line of south Andhra Pradesh is known as the Nallamala forest. The Nallamali constitute the most impressive chain of the rolling hills laid in north to south and south-west direction in tune with the westran coastal belt of bay of Bengal. Geographically these hill ranges are located roughly between 15° 10' and 16° 30' Northern latitude and 78° 30' and 80° 10' Eastern longitude. The Northern most bondries of the Nallamalli lies in the planadu basin of Guntur district and the south boundries lies in Tirupathi hills. The total length of the Nallamali from the Northern edge to the South is 430 kms. The Nallamali forest are divided in to two blocks by the river Krishna ; Northern block and southern block. The northern block encompasses part of Mahboobnagar and Nalagonda district. The southern

block comprises part of Kurnool, Prakasham and Guntur District. The area of present study falls under the sothern block of Prakasham District.

The sacred groves found in Nallamala can basically be classified under three categories. Traditional sacred Groves- It is the place where the village deity resides, who is represented by an elementary symbol. Temple Grove- Here a grove is created around a temple and conserved. Groves around the burial or crimation grounds. Sacred Groves are fast becoming the only sanctuaries for culturally and ecologically important species of plants and animals in many areas. These natural sites are areas that have been protected by the local people from over-exploitation for social and religious reasons. Sacred sites are established for a number of purposes. Often, they are considered to be the residence of a local deity, or contain an object or body of water that houses the deity. Groves of this kind are commonly referred to as fetish groves and therefore are thought to be the domain of ancestral spirits. In all types of sacred groves some level of restriction is placed on who can enter the grove, and on extractive uses of forest resources. The degree of sanctity of the sacred forests varies from one grove to another. In some forests even the dry foliage and fallen fruits are not touched. All forms of vegetation in the sacred grove are supposed to be under the protection of the reigning deity of that groves, and the removal of even a small twig is taboo (Vartak and Gadgil, 1973). People believe that any kind of disturbance will offend the local deity, causing diseases, natural calamities, and failure of crops. In other groves, dead wood or dried leaves may be picked up, but the live tree or its branches are never cut. Hunting and the collection of wood for fuel or other purposes are prohibited in most cases. Access to the grove is limited for the general population, while one or several religious practitioners or members of a secret society have greater access to and authority over the grove. These individuals often hold the privilege of collecting medicinal plants or materials from the grove for ceremonial uses. The restrictions on access and use are enforced by a fear of supernatural punishment and by community pressure to respect the rules governing the sacred grove. Greater access to the site is granted during religious rituals or celebrations, during which hunting and the collection of plant materials are permitted for ritual purposes. Cultural and religious protection of sacred sites serves an ecological as well as a social purpose, though the ecological benefits have not always been consciously acknowledged. Sacred groves provide various ecosystem services to the local communities. Some groves protect actual bodies of water, such as streams or springs. Even those that do not protect a water source directly help to keep their immediate surroundings cooler and moister than the air would otherwise be. Vegetation retains water, and releases it slowly during dry periods. This adds humidity to the air and cools it. Similarly, vegetation holds nutrients, and the root systems keep nutrients in the soil from leaching away. The nutrients in the soil are replenished as leaf litter and other organic material decomposes. This means that the soil in the grove and in the immediate vicinity is more fertile than the

soil of the surrounding area that has been intensively farmed and the richness of biodiversity existing in the groves

. Andhra is famous for its greenery and nature conservation as well as vast programme of nature reserved development over the last 30 years. Sacred groves are forest plants conventionally preserved by the local tribal people entertained with their socio-cultural and religious practices. These indigenous tribes live close into vicinity of forest with harmony in nature and managed and serve the biodiversity of their vegetation. Since the ages they developed own cultures, religion customs, food and large number of sacred groves. This knowledge of conservation plants by this tribal communities have become their common property and it is also freely transmitted from generation to generation just by oral communication.

3. Research Methodology

The data was collected by meeting some tribal people in Nallamala forest and I also interacted and discussed thoroughly with them. This interaction with these people has given me a lot of information about the plants. It is true in real life also, the beliefs of these people seem to be observed, but in fact their belief has a deep root in conservation of some rare plants. I also came to know that these people belief has save and conserved some wonderful plants in the forest regions as well as rural and urban areas. These tribal people have good knowledge about usage and conservation of plants through oral communication. Nallamala forest is known for as place for gods and these are many number of famous religious temples are located, besides confluence of ghat dam of shrisailm reservoir. Biological diversity of Nallamala forest is very rich and much is known about sacred groves of the tribes. The community regards many natural plants objects as sacred. These include river shrisailam. The religious shrisailam the traditional Hindu society recognizes individual species as objects of worship. The sacred groves are symbolized the dynamic social force linked with access and control on the available resources. They have a great heritage of different gene pool of forest species contain socio-regions connection and possess medicinal values. Sacred groves are ecologically very important they are rare, endemic and endangered species of Nallamala forest. Socially worshiped multi purpose tree-Neem is an important antibiotic and medicinal use plant. It is also believed that this plant has supernatural power in controlling ghosts, they use twinges of neem to perform a pooja and hit the so called devil possessed person with neem leaves, and besides neem leaf is used to give sacred water in the temples. This tree helps in improving the soil fertility through efficient cycling conserving moisture through leaves and fruits on the soil. The values of sacred groves are uncountable. This also leads to conserve plants as well as water.

This oral communication is passed to one person to another person since the ages. These plants names and associated belief have been collected from tribes given (Table -1).

Table 1: Sacred Plants

S. No	Botanical Name	Local Name	Family	Sacred significance
1	<i>Calotropis gigantea</i> (L.)	Tella jilledu	Asclepiadaceae	The plant leaves are offered to lord sivdu.
2	<i>Cassia fistula</i> L.	Rela chettu	Fabaceae	The twigs are kept in house away evil sprits.
3	<i>Aegle marmelos</i> (L.)	Maradu chettu	Rutaceae	Leaves are offered to Lord Sivudu at the time of Sivarathri
4	<i>Azadirachta indica</i>	Vepa chettu	Meliaceae	The plant leaves are offered to polarama.
5	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i> L.	Marri chettu	Moraceae	The sacred tree connected with earth Saturn and women worship to it for the permanence of their husband.
6	<i>Mangifera indica</i> L.	Mamidi chettu	Anacardia	The leaves are making string for doors on all auspicious occasions to attract positive power of nature.
7	<i>Prosopis cineraria</i> (L.)	Jammi chettu	Fabaceae	The bride and bride groom rotate around this plant for blessing of lord Vishnu.
8	<i>Ocimum sanctum</i> L.	Tulasi chettu	Lamiaceae	Leaves are used in all rituals.
9	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> L.	Ravi chettu	Moraceae	It is supposed that sitting under tree they will get more oxygen.
10	<i>Bauhinia racemosa</i> Lam	Aray chettu	Fabaceae	Fruits are offered to God of Bayanna at the time of local festival

Trees are protected through Sacred Groves:



Sacred Tree Elaga (*Limonia acidissima*)



Sacred Tree Neem (*Azadirachta indica*)



Sacred tree (*Ficus religiosa*)



Sacred tree Aray Tree (*Bauhinia racemosa* Lam)

4. Conclusion

It is very important to conservation of these plants in view of tribal belief and traditions in order to protect the forest and its biodiversity. This forest is in great danger caused by humans. They afforest much are under the name of

development, then it has no meaning by saying sustainable development. Selfish people damaging many plants under the name of growth and development. Over population is also another reason for extinct of some important plants. These sacred groves not only stand for loss of rich plants but also its rich culture associated with the grove. One matter that hinders the conservation of sacred groves, that the

village people living near by the sacred groves are very poor so they cut and sell the wood near by town. So it must be on augmentation programme to educate people about these great sacred groves.

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