

## SACRED GROVE AS AN INSTITUTION OF CULTURE AND CONSERVATION

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India is a land rich in biodiversity. Besides ecological and economic uses, bioresources are important for their religious, spiritual and other traditional values. Many animals and plants are worshipped or held sacred by people for their association with some spirits or deities. However, in addition to propitiation and preservation of isolated trees like *Aswatha*, *Bat*, *Bel* etc., there exists a practice of nature worship in the form of cluster of trees or forests patches known as sacred groves (Bhakat, 2003, 2009, 2010; Kisku *et al.*, 2009; Bhakat *et al.*, 2010; Bhakat and Sen, 2012). Sacred groves are generally considered as abodes of gods, goddesses, spirits or supernatural objects. They are worshipped, managed and protected by specific communities. Sacred groves are also viewed by scholars as symbol of ethnic identity (Gold and Gujar, 1989). Some scholars interpret that preservation of sacred groves is an ancient strategy for the sustainable use of natural resource (Roy Burman, 1995; Chandrakantha *et al.*, 2004).

It is believed that existence of sacred

grove dates back to several thousand of years when human society was in the pre-agrarian stage. In India, sacred groves are considered to be of pre-vedic origin. They are found in Africa, America, Asia, Australia and Europe. Although sacred groves have been reported from a good number of Indian states, they are mostly found in Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerela, Maharastra and Meghalaya (Malhotra *et al.*, 2000). In West Bengal, sacred groves are abundantly found in the districts of Bankura, Birbhum, Midnapur (West) and Purulia which have substantial number of different tribal populations. Although locally known by various names (*Baram than*, *Garam than*, *Jaher than*, *Sitala than* etc.), most of the sacred groves are storehouses of biodiversity, protecting a large number of plants, more specially some old tree populations. With this background, this paper highlights the socio-cultural aspects and conservation values of one (1) village sacred grove located in Jamboni police station of West Midnapore district in West Bengal.

The sacred grove under study, popularly known as *Swarga Baurir than* (named after the presiding deity *Swarga Bauri* of the grove) is situated in the Jamboni block

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(latitude 22°26′00.09″ - 22°26′01.48″N and longitude 86°50′00.90″ - 86°50′01.56″E, average altitude 86.70 m. asl.) of Jhargram sub-division in West Midnapore district of West Bengal. The grove houses a brick-made small temple of local forest goddess *Swarga Bauri*, and is spread over an 3.5 acre public land at the outskirts of villages *Chhotopindara* and *Dochakhuria* along the south-western bank of a perennial rivulet *Palpala*. Presently the grove is maintained by the local Sabars (Lodhas). It represents a 400-500 year old isolated forest patch consisting of evergreen, deciduous and semi-deciduous plants. The vegetation of the grove is multi-tiered and multi-specific in structure. While the upper canopy consists mainly of *Alstonia scholaris* (Chatim), *Diospyros melanoxylon* (Kendu), *Haldinia cordifolia* (Karam), *Holoptelea integrifolia* (Challa), *Madhuca longifolia* (Mahua), *Mangifera indica* (Aam), *Schleichera oleosa* (Kusum), *Strychnos nux-vomica* (Kuchila), *Tamarindus indica* (Tentul), *Terminalia tomentosa* (Asan) etc., the middle layer is represented by low-growing trees like *Acacia nilotica* (Babla), *Alangium salviifolium* (Ankar), *Bridelia retusa* (Bhuas), *Morinda citrifolia* (Ach), *Phoenix sylvestris* (Khejur), *Premna latifolia* (Agnimantha), *Streblus asper* (Saora), *Zizyphus mauritiana* (Kul) etc. The lower ground layer is covered with a large number of shrubs and herbs. Climbers and woody climbers like *Bauhinia vahlii* (Chihurlata), *Butea superba* (Lata palash), *Combretum ovalifolium* (Atang), *Tinospora cordifolia* (Padma Gulancha) criss-cross the grove canopy. Since, the grove is an abode of deity, the entire area along with its plants and other creatures is considered as sacred. Owing to this socio-religious tag on the grove, the local villagers do not cut or disturb the flora thus, strictly adhering to the local taboos and sentiments.

All sacred groves, irrespective of their

size and origin, are institutions of socio-cultural practices. And the present sacred grove is no exception. During, the annual *Paus sankranti* (a festival celebrated in the middle of January) and *Durga Puja*, people mainly tribals from the adjoining villages gather inside the grove and worship the local deity when a local fair is organised. Additionally, the deity may be worshipped on every Tuesday and Saturday or any day deemed auspicious by the local people. The folk-belief goes that propitiating the deity begets well being and prosperity of the villagers. It also wards off the attacks of evil forces and wild forest beasts. The grove also provides cultural space to the communities as a common property. It provides the local people a common platform for assertion of group identity and solidarity. They form new alliances while participating in the sacred grove-based rituals and ceremonies. Propitiation of deity inside the grove has also economic relevance in terms of good rainfall, prosperous agricultural production, welfare of domestic animals and source of medicine, timber, fruits during scarcity. Moreover, grove provides moral guidance and support to the communities.

Owing to continued protection offered on socio-religious grounds, the *Swarga-Bauri* sacred grove provides optimum conditions congenial for plant growth and survival. The grove supports 280 species of angiosperms covering 227 genera under 81 families. Herbs, shrubs, trees and climbers represent 110, 63, 64, and 43 species respectively. Since sacred groves are centers of ethnobotanical wisdom, the local people find here a large number of economically and socially important plants, particularly NTFPs. They normally do not collect/ harvest these plants for domestic uses, but do so only after the social sanction from the stakeholders of the grove, and that too in

a restricted/ sustainable way, not disturbing the local resources. The sacred grove bears 25 species with edible plant part(s), 5 fiber yielding species, 25 species with fodder value, 5 gum yielding species, 6 species producing dye, 14 species having insecticidal properties, 10 oil producing species, 14 species have ornamental value, 2 species yield spice, 26 tanning producing species, 13 species with sacred value and 203 species having medicinal properties. Among the medicinal plants, few species like *Crataeva nurvala* (Barun), *Rauvolfia serpentina* (Sarpagandha), *Rauvolfia tetraphylla* (Gandhagokul), *Schleichera oleosa* (Kusum), *Terminalia bellirica* (Bahera), *Terminalia chebula* (Haritaki), *Tylophora indica* (Antamul) etc., once abundant in the nearby forest areas, have their populations now restricted in few isolated areas including sacred groves. This kind of traditional conservation of disappearing taxa of forest based medicinal plants in sacred groves of Midnapore district is also earlier reported by Bhakat and Sen (2008) and Bhakat and Pandit (2008).

The *Swarga Bauri* sacred grove, although fairly well protected, is facing mild threats by grazing animals, invasion of exotic weeds and erosion of traditional values towards plants among the younger generations. Moreover, dyeing of ailing trees and occasional water-logging during the monsoon pose additional threats to the grove. Therefore, the grove needs care and attention. Steps should be taken to promote awareness among the villagers. And scientists, local administrative bodies, both local and state-level, should come to initiate this. And also, there is a need to study similar other sacred groves of West Bengal which act as islands of biodiversity.

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