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Review Article

SACRED GROVES: AN ANALYSIS MADE IN THE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE WITHIN BTC, ASSAM, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Nature worship is an integral part of human society that could be assigned to any place or natural elements. According to IUCN, sacred groves are considered as "sacred natural sites" that are the relic forest patches preserved in the name of religion or culture as observed in many societies. Most of them are associated with indigenous tribal communities who mostly believe in divinity of nature and natural resources. Since religion and cultural practices are closely linked with forests, a preliminary survey of sacred plants used by the Bodo tribes in various parts of BTAD areas reveals that they use 31 numbers of plants as sacred ones. Variety of religious and traditional rituals related to gods, goddesses performed in various ways also reflect the relationship of human and species conservation since it serve as a tool for conserving biodiversity intertwined with religious practices.

Keywords: Sacred groves, Bodos, biodiversity

INTRODUCTION

The North East India comprises many tribes with diverse cultures mingling into the mainstream of India's national life (Mosahary, 1986). Though their cultures may be crude in the modern sense of term, there are charms and beauties reflecting originality and deep pathos of hearts among the tribal people. Assam, India in particular, presented a picture of multi-racial groups of people with diverse historical and cultural background. Of these racial groups, the most important one is the Kirata or Mongoloid, who constitutes the third basic element in the formation of the Indian people along with the Negroids, Austriacs, Dravidians and Nordics (S.K Chatterjee). Among these the Boros, a constituent tribe of North East India, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Tibetan Chinese speech family are an important section of the population of Assam, India plains that have spread all over the Brahmaputra valley and the contiguous areas of North Bengal, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland, India etc. Until date, the Bodo tribes have preserved their social, cultural institutions, their language, traditional socio-religious beliefs and practices. All these traditional worship practices show their symbiotic relationship with nature where the tracts of sacred grooves harbours rich biodiversity and are protected by the local people due to their cultural, religious beliefs and taboos that these deities reside in them (Khan *et al.*, 2008). The sacredness, religious beliefs and taboos play a significant role in promoting sustainable utilization along with conservation of flora and fauna of the region. Since traditional practices have been invariably operating in different parts of BTC areas, sacred groves forms the repositories of rare and

endemic species that can be regarded as the remnant of the primary forest left untouched by the local inhabitants and protected due to the beliefs that the deities reside in these forests (Anthwal *et al.*, 2006). The word sacred refers to 'be holy or connected with God'. They are small patches of land area with particular type of trees that are considered to be holy by the local community. Thus sacred groves are primal landscapes of creation that deeply touch the spiritual, cultural, aesthetic and relational dimensions of human existence. Since indigenous and traditional people have well developed systems of environmental ethics, these groves gives geographic grounding to sacred natural sites and landscapes; sacred groves in North east India. Plants have been very closely associated with development of human civilization and culture. Since time immemorial, various indigenous communities all over the world are living in close harmony with nature and biodiversity. Presences of sacred groves in India have been well documented since early 1800s. Traditional societies and various indigenous communities all over the world have established sacred natural places and had protected them from destruction. Most of these sacred groves are planted around artificially dug sacred ponds or are associated with individual deities of god and goddess. As heritage is our legacy from the past that we live today and that is passed on to future generations; our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration. The religious books, old scriptures and epics from India, China, Greece, Italy and Egyptian papiries were fully impregnated with such details. Historical links of sacred groves to the pre-agricultural, hunting and gathering stage has been traced

from various stages of societies. From the hoary past, especially the Hindus have been using certain plants, in rituals and religious ceremonies. Indian sacred groves demonstrate unique diversity. In India sacred groves are an area with particular types of trees dedicated to local deities or ancestral spirits that are protected by local communities through social traditions and taboos incorporating spiritual and ecological values. Some contain only a few trees, while others are spread over hundreds of acres where these sacred groves are located in a variety of habitats ranging from resource rich forest landscapes, such as Western Ghats and Northeast to the extremely poor desert conditions in western and central India. It is reported that more than 30 sacred groves exist in the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya, India where nearly two thirds of these are in excess of 100 hectares in size. Similarly, in the neighboring eastern part of Karbi Anglong district of Assam, India more than 100 sacred groves proliferate. Both these districts are inhabited by indigenous tribal populations portraying different contexts of conservation of sacred groves. In East Khasi Hills, sacred groves are fairly well documented and strictly governed; the same is in eastern Karbi Anglong district of Assam, India (Khiewtan and Ramakrishna 1989; Ramakrishnan 1998, 2001; Sinha and Maikhuri 1998; Tripathi *et al.* 1995; Jamir and Pandey 2002). In northeastern India, various ethnic groups have preserved and protected several forest patches with their belief in nature's worship. In India, we have a long list of plants connected with religious festivals, rituals and worship of the Vedic Aryans. Plants with similar uses are also known to occur among the Bodos in their religious worship and festivals. Plants like *Musa paradisiaca*, *Mangifera indica*, *Ficus religiosa*, *Cocos nucifera*, *Areca catechu*, *Piper betle* either etc., individually or collectively figure in many Bodo epics, folk tale, and mythological stories. All these plants are also used in numerous rituals in Hindu household from birth to death.

Importance of sacred groves

There are substantial literature that provides ample evidence on the economic benefits of protected areas including monetary valuation and environmental ethics related with non-material aspects of nature and wild lands. A link between cultural and biological diversity along with spiritual values exist in the minds of indigenous people that provide intangible benefits to these protected areas (Maffi *et al.*, 2000; Maffi 2010). Conservation of individual species is important because of its medicinal, scientific and social values. Nevertheless, apart from these, conservation of biodiversity is of critical importance to the modern agricultural techniques as it employs to cater the need of growing population. Ability of an ecosystem to resist change is partly determined by its biodiversity. All these sacred plants are valued by the society for myriad reasons like material resources that contributes to human physical well being and non material dimensions that contribute intangible benefits to the quality of life along with intrinsic benefits that exist independent of mankind. Loss of biodiversity is extremely hazardous to the environment since our existence depends on the continued presence of flourishing biota. Diversity enhances health and vitality of a biota where greater the

number of species in an ecosystem, healthier is the ecosystem and more diverse is the ecosystem, the greater chance it can survive the disruption. Besides these the sacred groves provides refuge for endemic and endangered plant or animal species, provides ecosystem services such as reservoirs of biodiversity, improves soil stability, prevents soil erosion and also acts as indicator of ethno environmental management. The sacred groves also help conserving the indigenous flora and fauna, provide relatives of crop species that may help to improve cultivated varieties and act as a storehouse of medicinal plants valuable for mankind. Hence sacred groves are segments of landscape containing vegetation and other forms of life along with geographical features that are delimited and protected by human societies under the belief that keeping these groves in a relatively undisturbed state is expressive of an important relationship of humans with the divine or with nature (Hughes and Chandran, 1998). All these sacred groves help in preservation of cultural and ethical practices that were developed through indigenous knowledge of generations contributing promotion of regional or national goals of biodiversity conservation (Ramakrishnan and Ram, 1988). Thus, studies have shown that biodiversity increases both productivity and stability of an ecosystem, it also increases the resilience of an ecosystem making it well able to withstand different types of stresses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Bodo tribes believe that the sacred groves are the abode of deities. The Bodo follow Bathou religion, the religion of five principles or thoughts, which has a close affinity to Hinduism. Every courtyard has a Bathou altar, consisting of a Sijou (*Euphorbia neriifolia*) tree fenced by bamboo strips, where prayers are offered to their Gods. According to the Bodo belief, the 'Bathou', with five spurs of the Sijou tree signify the five elements of nature and the five guiding principles of the Bathou religion which represents the five basic elements of creation by Lord Shiva i.e., Dai, Bar, Ha, Okhrang (Water, Fire, Air, Soil and space respectively). Plants like *Ficus religiosa*, *Crateva religiosa*, *Enterolobium saman*, *Salmalia malabarica* and *Aegle marmelos* are supposed to be the abode of certain spirits and demi-gods. To the North of the altar is the main house, called Nomano, where the family members reside, with the kitchen next to it. The granary - Bakri is located in the east signifying the important role it plays in the culture of this agrarian community. Many legends, folklore and mythological stories are connected with the festival and religious practices of the Bodos. Sacred groves are tracts of virgin forests, which people protect to avoid the perceived wrath of the resident God. In such forests, all forms of vegetation belong to the deity. Various cultural programmes, religious rites and rituals are also performed in these forests (Mishra *et al.*, 2005). These rites and rituals vary from place to place and from one sacred grove to another. Belief and taboos are prime constructive tools for preserving sacred groves leading to its precarious status. However, sacred forests have undergone heavy environmental transformations because of several factors like change in land use pattern, unregulated tree felling, road constructions and other developmental factors.

Table 1: Sacred plant species of the Bodo community

S. No.	Scientific name	Vernacular name	Family	Uses
1.	<i>Aegle marmelos</i> L.	Bel	Rutaceae	Roots are sweet astringent, bitter and useful in diarrhoea, dysentery, weakness, vomiting, swelling and gastric irritability in infants. Leaves are considered abode of god trinity and is used in worshipping Lord Brahma and Shiva.
2.	<i>Anthocephalus cadamba</i> Miq.	Kwdwm	Rubiaceae	The tree is considered to be the abode of god Vishnu. Fruits are also eaten raw by the children.
3.	<i>Alstonia scholaris</i>	Chitla donphang	Apocynaceae	It is also known as Devils tree and is mostly used by the local people in making musical instruments. Milky juice extracted from the stem and leaves is used to treat various skin disorders.
4.	<i>Aquilaria agallocha</i> Roxb.	Agru	Thymelaeaceae	Wood and pleasing oils derived from this tree are used in many religious and cultural practices.
5.	<i>Areca catechu</i> L.	Goi	Arecaceae	Leaves and fruits are considered to be holy and is used as offering to God Brahma and Lord Shiva.
6.	<i>Azadirachta indica</i> Juss.	Neem gakha	Meliaceae	It is considered to be an air purifier and is used to treat various skin problems. Tender leaves are eaten as vegetable and as cure for diabetic and blood purification.
7.	<i>Butea monosperma</i> Taub.	Polash	Leguminosae	Trees are considered a form of Agnidev, God of Fire and flowers are used in worshiping goddess saraswati.
8.	<i>Cassia bakeriana</i> Craib	Radhasura	Caesalpiniaceae	It is a large showy ornamental tree, and bark of the trunk is reported to be used in to treat skin problems.
9.	<i>Cocos nucifera</i> L.	Narengkhoh	Arecaceae	It is used to treat Cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery, gastritis and for hair care. It is offered as a holy fruit to the deity.
10.	<i>Cynodon dactylon</i> L.	Dhubri hagra	Poaceae	It is mainly used to sprinkle the holy water during worship. The paste of the plant is applied on the cuts and wounds.
11.	<i>Cratogeomom adansonii</i> DC.	Dharma phul	Capparaceae	The tree is sacred to Lord Shiva and the leaves along flowers are used to worship him, especially on Mahashivaratri. Traditionally it is used as a cure for urinary infections. The bark and leaves are used to cure rheumatic pain and swellings.
12.	<i>Clerodendrum viscosum</i> Vent.	Mukhna	Verbenaceae	Flowers are necessary for Bathou worship. Traditionally leaves and roots are used as herbal remedy for asthma, cough, diarrhoea, rheumatism, fever and skin diseases.
13.	<i>Delonix regia</i> (Bojer) Raf	Krishnosura	Caesalpiniaceae	The tree is considered to be the abode of god Krishna.
14.	<i>Datura fastuosa</i> L.	Datura	Solanaceae	Flowers are offered in worshipping Lord Shiva.
15.	<i>Dendrocalamus strictus</i> Nees	Owa	Acanthaceae	The apical remaining with branches is used as flag, rest are spliced to make 5 rings on the alter and for making bamboo pegs.
16.	<i>Enterolobium saman</i> (Jacq.) Prain ex King	Shiri donfang	Fabaceae	The children eat sweet and sugary ripe pulp raw. It is considered the abode of Lord Indra and is also known as rain tree.
17.	<i>Euphorbia neriiifolia</i> L.	Sijou	Euphorbiaceae	It is to be planted on the main alter as a symbol of supreme deity 'Lord Shiva'.
18.	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> L.	Pakri	Moraceae	This is one of the most sacred tree, and is worshiped to gain blessing on almost all rituals.
19.	<i>Ficus bengalensis</i> L.	Pakri	Moraceae	This tree is considered sacred in India and often shelters a little or larger temple underneath.
20.	<i>Gemelina arborea</i> Roxb.	Gumbari	Lamiaceae	A stool is made out of wood, which is supposed to be very sacred. A priest has to sit in all ceremonial ritual occasions while chanting charms and incantations.
21.	<i>Hibiscus rosa sinensis</i>	Joba bibar	Malvaceae	Whole plant is considered to be holy and flowers are used as offerings during festivals and ceremonial rituals.
22.	<i>Justicia assamica</i> C. B. Clarke	Jatrashi	Acanthaceae	It is used for making alter for the goddess of learning. Leaves are also used to sprinkle holy water
23.	<i>Mangifera indica</i> L.	Thaijow	Anacardiaceae	Leaves and fruits are used as offering to the deity. Leaves are also used to sprinkle holy water.
24.	<i>Musa paradisiidca</i> L.	Tahlet	Musaceae	It is a chief material used in the containers of the puja offerings and is used for serving food and drinks in the puja.
25.	<i>Nelumbo nucifera</i> Gaertn.	Thoblou	Nelumbonaceae	Lotus is considered as an evocative symbol of beauty, purity and divinity. In Hinduism, it represents the manifestation of god and is used in all religious rituals
26.	<i>Ocimum sanctum</i> L.	Tulsi	Lamiaceae	It is planted on the alter as a symbol of goddess of wealth and is also used for sprinkling holy water.
27.	<i>Piper betle</i> L.	Patwi	Piperaceae	Leaves are used in all religious ceremonies and are regarded as a pleasure to Goddess Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth) and Lord Brahma. The leaves are also chewed to sweeten the breath and improve voice.
28.	<i>Phlogacanthus thyriflorus</i> Nees	Barsikhu bibar	Acanthaceae	The flowers are used in Bathou worship. It is also used as a cure for diabetics.
29.	<i>Salmalia malabarica</i> Schott. and Endl.	Sumli donphang	Bombacaceae	Cotton extracted from seeds are used to lighten earthen lamps in temples.
30.	<i>Saccharum spontanium</i> L.	Siju	Poaceae	Also called Siju, it is to be planted on the main alter as a symbol of supreme deity 'Lord Shiva'.
31.	<i>Santalum paniculatum</i> Hook. and Arn.	Chandan	Santalaceae	The tree is integral to rituals and ceremonies, to mark religious utensils, and to decorate the icons of the deities and is applied to the foreheads as blessing fro

In spite of religious beliefs, sacred groves are decreasing with the onslaught of modernization (John, 1997). Thus, the Bodos have culturally varied and rich materials that warrant systematic research based on the direct fieldwork. This traditional and indigenous knowledge and ecological prudence underlying genetic conservation may get lost forever unless they are recognized and documented (Swaminathan, 1995). Anthropogenic pressures like various developmental activities, over exploitation of resources, modernization, urbanization and increase in human population has lead to the destruction of natural sites. Thus viable steps should be undertaken for sustaining their economic condition and conservation of sacred groves followed by proper legislative support.

CONCLUSION

All indigenous and traditional people have well-developed systems of environmental ethics that are expressed through their worldviews and cosmologies which gives geographical grounding through sacred natural sites and landscapes. Thus, present investigation provides documentation, conservation and usage of data based traditional knowledge that are now a priority issue in our national agenda. Studies of sacred groves will provide an in depth research with a system approach to wild species/varieties of medicinal plants and biodiversity conservation needed to integrate them into existing cultivation regime and nature preservation.

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