

People's Initiative Revives A Sacred Grove

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Abstract: Sacred groves are small to large chunk of forest patches traditionally protected and managed by local communities. The real need of people's participation in conservation has also been realised recently. Since traditional knowledges/practices pertaining to resource management in sacred groves revolve around socio-religious systems, this approach gives people strong legitimacy, going beyond scientific arguments. And for this, the concept of sacred grove has not only carved out a niche in itself in community-based in situ conservation of biodiversity, but the tradition is also being revived in some cases. The present study deals with the many socio-cultural and ecological perspectives of a revived sacred grove situated in Chilkigarh village of West Bengal. Notwithstanding the fact that the sacred grove acts as a sanctuary for a large number of rare and threatened plants including medicinal species and other century-old fascinating lofty trees, socio-cultural value of the grove and indirect economic benefits from it are the overriding factors that give legitimacy and prompted the local people to protect and manage the grove. A protected healthy grove with its unmolested beauty ensures a better livelihood for stakeholders through the socio-cultural gatherings of visitors, tourists and devotees. This is one of the many reasons why people have initiated certain conservation strategies for the long-term better management of the grove. The present study, thus, could be used as an inspiring example in India for other community-based conservation initiatives in general and revival of sacred groves in particular.

Introduction

Since time immemorial, conservation of natural resources has been an integral aspect of many indigenous communities all over the world. Nature worship is a key force in determining human attitude towards environmental conservation. Many traditional conservation ethics of these people directly or indirectly protect forest patches by dedicating them to local deities. Such forest pockets, referred to as sacred groves, are more or less small to large chunk of traditionally protected near-virgin forests managed through people's participation.

The real need of people's participation in conservation has also been realised recently. Due to failure of pure legal protection in guaranteeing conservation, it has become imperative to search for alternative solutions based on the local people's indigenous knowledges and practices which are only now being acknowledged by conservationists, as being of equal importance and relevance. These local community knowledges/practices provide a host of advantages in addressing community-based conservation, and have an edge over the modern scientific conservation programmes. Since rules pertaining to resource use revolve around religious and cultural systems, this approach gives them strong legitimacy, going beyond the scientific arguments. For example, sacred groves, irrespective of their origin and size, are islands of biodiversity – an ecological function, and are themselves protected as abodes of deities or spirits – a cultural justification¹⁻⁸. Building conservation strategies based on people's knowledge, therefore ensures better acceptance and yields good results⁹.

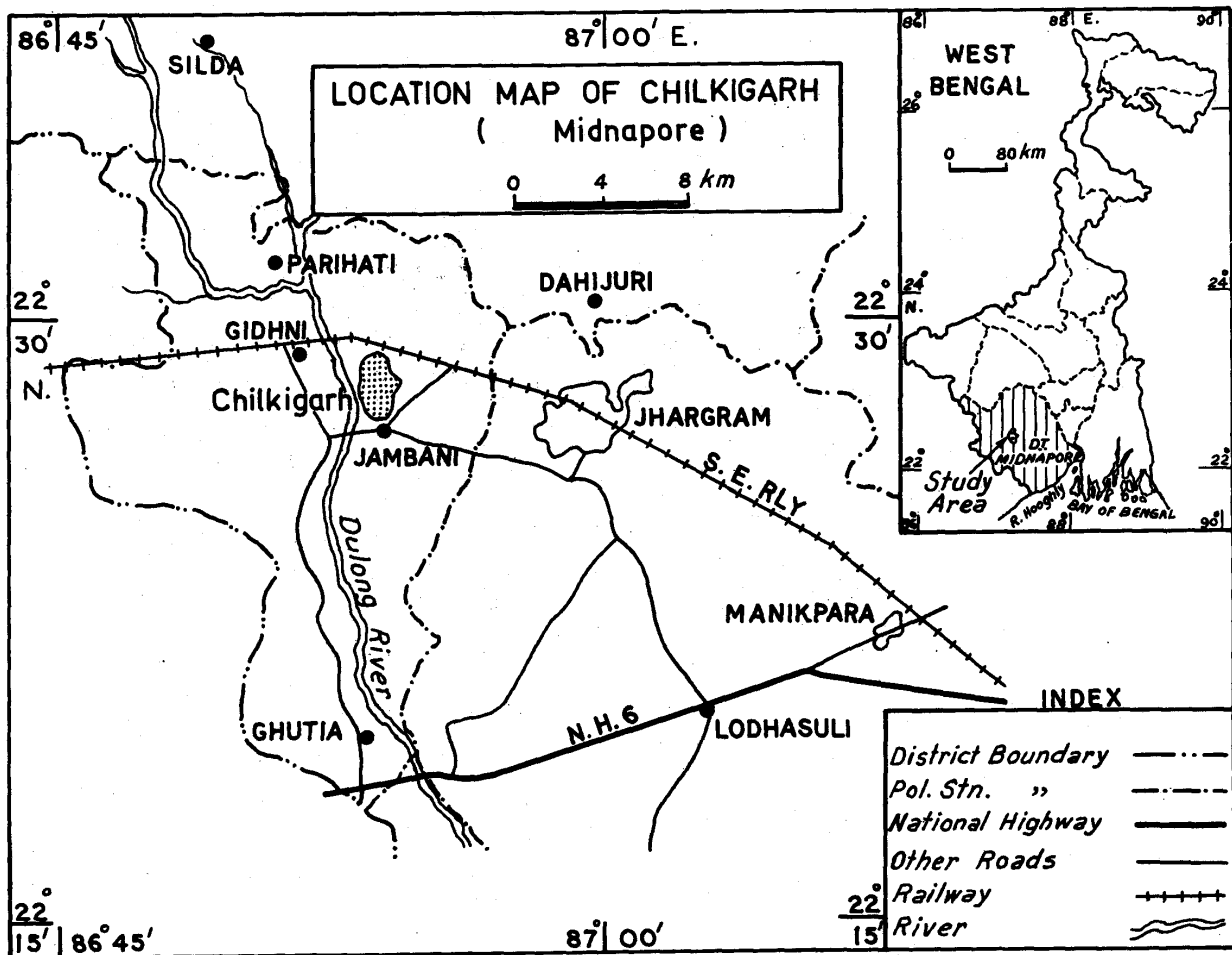
With this realisation, the recent upsurge of interest in studying sacred groves has not only established the topic as one of ecological significance, but this tradition is also being revived in some cases like *Sarna* (sacred grove) movement in Madhya Pradesh¹⁰, *Gamkhal* or “forest reserve” revival in north-eastern states of Manipur and Mizoram¹¹ or setting up of small sacred groves by farmers of Karnataka on their own farms¹². Such cases of revival seem dependent on local communities perceiving tangible losses of benefits on liquidation of sacred groves. Therefore, there is an urgent need to assess the status of such areas from ecological and cultural perspectives in

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order to develop a strategy for revival and incorporation of this tradition in conservation. Keeping this in mind, this paper tries to dissect the various socio-cultural and ecological dimensions of a revived sacred grove situated at Chilkgarh village in West Bengal.

The Sacred Grove

The present sacred grove (latitude $22^{\circ}15' - 22^{\circ}0'$ N and longitude $86^{\circ}45' - 87^{\circ}0'$ E) popularly known as Chilkgarh (named after its adjacent village on the western side), is situated in the Jamboni police station of Midnapore (now West Midnapore) district (Figure. 1). This 58-acre grove represents a relict forest patch in its near-climax stage along the east catchment zone of the Dulong river. The forest houses the historically famous temple of *Kanak Durga*, and for this the entire landscape is considered sacred. The whole area is maintained and managed by a temple trust.



Source: Kamilya and Paria, 1994

Figure 1. Map of Midnapore District (undivided) showing the location of Chilkgarh

This sacred forest is known to exist long before the Nawab period of Bengal. It is said that the *Bargees* (the marauders) used to take shelter inside the dense forest during the day-time, thus concealing themselves in ambush to strike after nightfall. According to historical evidences¹³⁻¹⁴, during the days of yore, the forest belonged to the royal family of *Dhalbhum* estate of the Junglemahal province. The king kept the forest intact for defence purpose. The thick green cover acted as a shield against enemy invasion to the Chilkgarh village-based palace. It is reported that

there is no taboo whatsoever associated with the sacred grove or its flora, although the forest harbours a large number of socio-religious species. This is quite in sharp contrast with the caste-based other sacred groves of *Kora* and *Santal* tribes of the same village. Since the sacred grove is maintained and managed by the mainstream Hindu society, caste and creed do not play any role. During the annual Durga Puja Festival, people from every hue throng the sacred premises, offering pujas and seeking blessings of the presiding deity. People's perception about the grove is that it helps people socialise and thus fosters solidarity among them. It is an example of local ownership and autonomy. The sacred grove serves as a rallying point when local people need community help and solidarity.

People's Initiative

During the post-independence period, with the escalating human population coupled with the shrinking forest areas, the local people started using the sacred grove as a common property resource. As a result, the forest started declining and was reduced into a degraded scrubland. And this trend continued till recently when two botanists from Calcutta University, Kamilya and Paria (1994)¹⁵, for the first time highlighted the ecological role of the area and also sought for a joint-protection initiative along with the local people. The botanists in their research findings conclude : "It (Chilkigarh) obviously offers an interesting botanical study area because of characteristics vegetation in such specific ecological habitats being located almost in trijunction of the three states (West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa). Such a rich and unique floral wealth of the district Midnapore (West Bengal) calls for a protection against indiscriminate exploitation of vegetation in the form of fodder, fuel and biotic interference by local population". And only thereafter, the local people's attitude has changed in a positive way. Presently the entire sacred complex has been taken over by the Kanak Durga Temple Trust consisting of members from Chilkigarh and adjoining villages. It has erected a mechanical fencing around the forest in addition to reviving the concept of social fencing through inculcating the traditional socio-religious and ecological values of plants. During the last few years, the trust has renovated and redeveloped the sacred complex step by step, initiating various developmental activities. Moreover, people who are directly or indirectly associated with the grove also help the present custodian of the grove protect and manage the area.

Despite the presence of a large number of economically valuable plants, people do not perceive any economic benefit of the forest since resource extraction is not done except under special circumstances. Discussion with stakeholder groups indicates that better management of the sacred grove by the stakeholders can offer them direct monetary benefits even without extracting the biomass of the grove. They mention that direct benefits come from their association and involvement with the sacred grove in one way or other. The economic or material benefits are coming through the tourists, visitors and devotees.

Biodiversity Conservation

Since the sacred grove is a segment of the larger landscape containing plants and other forms of geographical features that are protected by human societies, it is of great ecological significance. The foremost ecological function is the protection of biodiversity. It is a home to a good number of rare and threatened plant species. Floristic surveys of this region done by Kamilya and Paria (1994)¹⁵ and Bhakat and Pandit (2003)¹⁶ reveal a total of 388 species of angiosperms covering 295 genera belonging to 89 families. Assemblage of deciduous, semideciduous and evergreen species makes the vegetation a mixed type with several co-dominant species. The diversity of the vegetation as well as flora of the grove is enriched by a number of climbers, woody climbers, parasites, epiphytes, ground orchids and some rare cryptogams like *Helminthostachys*, *Ophioglossum* and *Selaginella*. Moreover, the grove houses 105 species of medicinal plants which account nearly 36 percent of the total 288 medicinal plants of the undivided Midnapore district.¹⁷ The forest seems to be the last shelter of once-abundant but now vanishing medicinal species like *Crataeva nurvala*, *Gymnema sylvestre*, *Holarrhena antidysenterica*, *Rauwolfia serpentina*, *R. tetraphylla*, *Strychnos nux-vomica* and *Tylophora asthmatica*.

Owing to protection offered on socio-religious grounds, the sacred grove provides optimum conditions congenial for the growth of plants. As a result, some of the floristic elements attain maximum dimensions. A botanist

is often confronted here with the unbelievable phenomenon of size and growth patterns of plant associations. Some of the lofty tree species showing grandeur, and thus becoming a fascinating sight are *Alangium salvifolium*, *Anthocephalus cadamba*, *Alstonia scholaris*, *Haldinia cordifolia*, *Holoptelea integrifolia*, *Strychnos nux-vomica* and *Mimusops elengi*.

Apart from trees, some climbers particularly woody ones show maximum attainable growth patterns often with bizarre shapes. For example, *Bauhinia vahlii*, a normal feature of deciduous forests of south-west Bengal, shows monstrous growth in the Chilkigarh grove. It's pillar-like meandering stems of 0.4 to 0.5 m diameter crisscross the grove canopy, often lying above at human height in some places and sometimes resting on forked tree branches, thus suppressing all other tall shrubs and small trees in between. This type of unusual growth phenomenon in plants of sacred groves is also reported by Vartak and Kumbhojkar (1985)¹⁸ and Upadhye et al (1987)¹⁹ in Maharashtra, India. In view of this, these specimens need to be preserved as national monuments.

The sacred grove, on account of its locational uniqueness, performs other ecological roles too. Being situated amidst the crop fields and surrounded by dry deciduous forests typical of the South Bengal, the grove plays a dynamic role in balancing different ecosystems including the village ecosystem of the region. It is an abode of various creatures whose food-chain is connected through a predator-prey interaction. Moreover, a large number of avifauna take shelter in the forest, and their droppings rich in phosphorus replenish the forest soil. The birds, in addition, help seed and fruit dispersal of plants. Besides, a countless number of forest insects that make the grove even more richer in biodiversity facilitate cross-pollination of the adjoining plants.

Conclusion

The sacred grove in essence epitomises an all embracing concept and practice of the ancient Indian way of *in situ* conservation of biodiversity. It still serves as a miniature representative vegetation of the area reminiscent of modern protected areas. Preservation of these species could be of great economic significance. Some of the species preserved are already of medicinal importance; others could acquire such significance in future. The grove also preserves genotypes which may be useful in future tree-breeding programmes. As such it is an excellent outdoor location for conducting scientific studies in terms of silviculture. The forest gives a good clue to the composition of the erstwhile vegetation of the area. Moreover, the sacred grove provides outdoor illustration for the classroom. Students and teachers may have a glimpse of the environment to understand ecology, taxonomy and community management of a regional plant resource.

The present status of sacred groves everywhere is a matter of deep concern as they are fast disappearing from the countryside. Their presence in the agricultural lands, unauthorised and unregulated cutting of plants, grazing, erosion of social and cultural values are the many reasons. In view of this, and due to failure of pure legal machinery to conserve biodiversity, it has become increasingly necessary to formulate policies based on local people's traditional knowledge. Therefore, there is an urgent need not only to protect sacred forests, but also to revive and reinvent such traditional ways of nature conservation and biodiversity management.

In view of this, people associated with the grove think it necessary to conserve the forest. For the long-term effective conservation and better management of the grove, they have initiated a 4-point programme. These are: 1. To promote natural regeneration of the forest, socio-cultural gatherings are being restricted in the earmarked place of the grove, 2. To enrich the grove flora, socio-culturally relevant plant species are being introduced, 3. To ensure social fencing, the prevailing traditional beliefs and values about the grove are being increasingly publicised, and 4. To increase the income through devotees, visitors and tourists, the area is being considered to be declared as eco-pilgrimage centre.

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