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Title of the Paper: **Conservation of bio-diversities and tradition in Sacred Groves: A study in the tribal Villages in West Bengal India**

*Key words: Sacred, ethnic identity, groves, tradition, conservation, bio-diversity, tribal*

**Long abstract:**

Sacred groves are the patches of forests or trees , which are the abodes of deities or spirits reflect the religious affiliation as the deities are either worshipped . The ethnic identity is viewed also. As an institution it also interprets preservation and conservation of plants, herbs, climbers existing in the place. There are good number of medicinal plants is available in the sacred groves, which depict the ethno-medicinal traditions. The present sacred grove though small in size, in essence represents the concept the traditional way in-situ conservation of plants and forests. This also provides social space wherein tribals renew the cultural identities and find social solidarity.

Attempt has been in this paper studying sacred groves in the tribal Villages of West Bengal of India studying festivals, festivities and rituals for showing conservation of bio-diversities and tradition.

Paper :

**01. Introduction:** Sacred grove is such an outcome of indigenous knowledge added to community institution for the ecological sustainability i.e. continuous growth of trees species and organisms, productivity and adaptability for conservation or enhancement for use by future generations. Sacred grove is a very old institution, which is thought to date back several thousand years or at least the pre-agrarian period of hunter-gatherer societies. Sacred grove is a sacred ecology consisting of a single tree, single pond to a cluster of tree. This is a kind of nature worship maintained as a protection of habitat, consecrating to a deity on ancestral worship. So the patches of natural vegetation set apart from surrounding ecology. Thus sacred groves (SGs) are segments of landscape, containing vegetation and other forms of life and geographical features that are delimited and protected by human societies under the belief system, especially taboos and sanctions to give them relatively undisturbed. Wherever the SGs occur, through the diverse cultural perception and institutional values are observed. This paper

will deal with from two aspects: (i) anthropological dimension and (ii) persistence and change in the present day.

## 02. Antiquity of SGs:

Several scholars have noted that SGs are very ancient and widespread institution in the Old World cultures. According to Kosambi (1962) these institutions in India is very ancient and dates back to the pre-agrarian hunting gathering stage, before humans had settled down to raise livestock or till the land. Henri Skolomowski states that sacred grove in India are as ancient as the civilization itself. Indeed they go back to the prehistoric, pre-agricultural times. While the idea and the existence of sacred groves and forests did not survive in the west as we have progressively become a secular society these groves survived in India (Skolmowski 1991). In India, one of the earliest documented work on Sacred Groves dates back to 1897, when the first Inspector General of Forests, D. Brandis wrote: " very little has been published regarding sacred groves in India , but they are, or rather very numerous, I have found them in all province\_\_\_\_" (Brandis, 1897).

## 03. Geographical Distribution of SGs in India:

Sacred groves in India are as ancient as the civilization itself. Indeed, they go back to the pre-historic pre-agricultural times. Apparently due to the greater plasticity of Hinduism, which itself absorbing numberless local cults, including many tribal ones, instead of vanquishing them as done by other major religions, a large number of sacred groves remained in our country. We also have the tradition of planting and protectiong sacred trees like Ficus, probably dating back to the Indus Valley culture. In the words of D. Brandis (1897), the first Inspector General of Forests in India:

*"Very little has been published regarding sacred groves in India, but they are, or rather were, very numerous. I have found them in neraly all provinces. An instance I mention the Garo and Khasi hills..... the Devara Kadus of Coorg and all the hill ranges of Salam district in Madras Presidency.... In the dry region sacred groves are particularly numurous 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....."*

In the present day India the tradition of SGs is reported from most parts of country. However, for the following states there are no reports or studies available regarding the presence or absence of tradition. Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Jammu and Kashmir, Lakshdweep, Nagaland, Punjab and Tripura wherefrom no reports have come. Malhotra et al (2000) have reported 14029 SGs in different parts of India in the following table:

Table 1: An estimation of sacred groves in India

State	Location	No. of SGs (Parenthesis shows number)	References
1. Andhrapredesh	Adilabad (2), Anantapur (73), Chittor (133), Cuddaapah (76), Cuddapah (76), East Godavari (10),	750	WWF-India,1996

	Guntur (17), Hyderabad((13), Karimnagar (4), Khammam (4), Krishna (12), Kurnool(115), Mehabubnagar (9), Medak (4), Nalgonda(9), Nellore(87), Nizamabad(7), Prakasam(59), Ranga Reddy (10), Srikakulam(30), Vishakhpatnam(30), Vizianangaram (32), Warangal(3), and West Godavari(17).		
2. Chhatisgarh	Bastar districts	600	-----
3. Gujarat		29	
4.Haryana	Kurukshetra	248	NAEB-1995
5.Himachal Pradesh	Simla, Mandi, Kullu, Lahul Spiti	500	Chhatre et al.,1998
6. Jharkhand	Chhotanagpur Plateau	21	Hembram, P.C., 1983
7.Karnataka	Uttara Kannada,Dakshina Kannada  Kodagu	1424	Kalam.1996
8. Kerala	Plains of Kerala	2,000	Rajendra prasad 1995
9.Tamilnadu	28 forested and non-forested districts	448	Amrithalingam 1998
10. Madhya Pradesh	Many parts- Jashpur etc.	Many	Patnaik and Pandey 1998
11. Maharashtra	Raigad, Jalgaon, Pune, Satara, Kohlapur, Yewatmala, Bhandara. Chandrapur	1600	Gadgil and Vartak, 1981
12.Meghalaya	Cherapunji	365	Tiwari et al., 1998
13.Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, , Mizoram	Arunachal Pradesh Manipur, Mizoram,	58 79 40	Gadgil, Hemam and Reddy 1997 Gokhale et al., 1998 Singh and Singh,1998; Malhotra, 1990 Ghosh,1992
14.Orissa	Chotanagpur, western forested and tribal regions	322	Malhotra et al. 1998
15.Rajasthan	Jodhpur, Jaisalmer Bikaner	9	Singh and Saxena,1998
16.Uttaranchal	Himalayan region	1	Sinha and Maikuri,1998
17. West Bengal	Midnapur	670	Malhotra et al., 1998
	Total	14029	

Source: Malhotra et al. (2000)

According to Gokhale et al. (1998), the total area of SGs in India as a whole, would be about 33,000 ha or 0.01 per cent of total area of India. This seems to be an underestimate as just 4,415 SGs reported so far cover over 42,000 ha given in the following table:

Table 2 : Total areas of SGs

State	No. of SGs	Area (Ha.)	References
Karnataka	1214	5947	Kalam 1996
Kerala	2000	500	Rajendraprasad 1995
Maharashtra	483	3570	Gadgil and Vartak 1981
Meghalaya	79	26320	Tiwari et al 1998
Orissa	322	50	Malhotra et al. 1998
Rajasthan (1)	1	83	Singh and Saxena 1998
Rajasthan (2)	8	158	Jha et. al
Tamilnadu	10	127	Swamy et al 1998
Uttaranchal	1	5500	Sinha and Maikuri 1998
West Bengal (1)	7	2	Malhotra et. al 1998
West Bengal (2)	290	15	Deb et. al 1997.
Total	4415	42278	

Nomenclature and size: There are different names given to sacred groves in different places. The names are: in Bihar- Sarna, Himachal Pradesh- Dev van, Karnataka- Devarakadus, Kerala-Kavu, Tamilnadu- Kovilkadu, Madhya Pradesh – Matagudi, Devgudi and Gaon devta., Maharashtra- Devrai or Devrahti (Western part) and Devgudi (eastern part), Assam- Than, Madaico, Meghalaya- Ki law Lyngdoh, Ki law Kyntang, Ki law Niam ,Ki law Adong, Ki law Shnong, Rajasthan- Oran, Uttarakhand- Dev van, West Bengal- Sitalthan, Shitalathan, Harithan, Sabitrithan, Santalburhithan, Jaherthan etc.

It is not possible to come up with a reasonable estimate. However in various studies it has been found that most of the sacred groves have the area below than 2 ha. The size of those varies from 2 ha to 15 ha. The size of the existing SGs varies widely from a cluster of a few trees to several hectares. Inter as well as intra-state variation has been noted with regard to size of the groves. In Maharashtra, for example the sizes of the groves tend to increase from south to north (Deshmukh et al 1998; Malhotra et al 2000). It appears that SGs in Western Maharashtra, Kodagu and Uttarkhand district of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan are considerably larger in size than those in the Orissa, Jharkhand and West Bengal.

#### 04. Description of some remarkable SGs:

Gadgil and Vartak (1976) suggest only four regions to be of importance for groves: The Khasi and Jaintia Hills: The Western Ghats of Maharashtra and Karnataka, Aravali hills and Sarguja, Chanda and Bastar areas of central india. Most of the traditional societies depend on the biodiversity contained in their rural environment for meeting livelihood concerns. In Sarguja district of Chhattisgarh every village has a grove of about 20 hectares. These serve as sanctuaries for herds of ungulates as well as are locally known as Sarna forest. In Kerala, about 750 such groves has been recorded, spread out an area of about 1.4 sq.km, where as

Orans constitute 6% of the land area in Uttar Kannada. In Gujarat Oran perceived to be a highest rank in 12 categories of Community Conservation Areas (CCA). Description of different SGs and given below:

- a) **Kans – The sacred groves of Western Ghats of Karnataka.**  
Kans are the sacred groves constituting of patches of evergreen forests in the Western Ghats of Karnataka. These forests are reported from Uttara Kannada District and old Mysore State Districts like Shimoga and Chikmagalur.
- b) **Kovil Kadu – Sacred groves of Tamilnadu**  
The groves have temples within them. While the residing deity in most of the sacred groves is the snake god, Ayyappan, Murugan and Amman are also worshipped in some places. On full moon days, communities offer prayers collectively. The villagers believe that the groves provide livelihood directly and restrict natural catastrophes. Thus, shrubs and herbs, climbers and lianes like *Aegle mermelos* eorr. (Bael), *Ailanthus malebarice* wall (Gugul), *Bassia latifolia* Roxb (Mahua), *Cocos nucifera* L. (Coconut), *Erythrine indica* Lam (Parijata), *Magniferai ndica* L (Mango), *Terminalia chebula* (Harra) *Cassia tora* L. (Chaksu), *Ervatamia* Sp., *Pareflora* Roxb.(Maule), are grown in Kovilkadus. Apart from sacred groves where natural vegetation has been protected, there are sacred gardens, locally erected. These are called Thirundavanas. These gardens are meant exclusively for growing flowers for the deity.
- c) **Maw-bukhar – Sacred groves of Meghalaya:**  
Sacred groves have been a part of the life and culture of the people of Meghalaya. Many sacred groves are still well protected, in spite of rapid decline in the traditional value system. The traditional religious belief is that the gods and spirits ancestors live in these groves. A large number of groves are located in the Cherapunji region of the east Khasi Hill District. The Mawphlang grove, close to Shillong town, and the Mawsmi grove in Cherrapunji and some of the famous groves in the North-East India. Traditionally, people around these groves believe that remove of plants or plant parts would offer the ruling deity, leading to local calamities.
- d) **Oran- Sacred groves of Rajasthan**  
Orans are sacred forests, attached to Sathris (temples) of the Bishnois community of Rajasthan. Possibly the word Oran is derived from the Sanskrit uparanya which means a small forest. It is mandatory for every sathris to have an Oran from where cutting of any tree is strictly prohibited. Gadgil states that the Bishnois of Rajasthan never uproot or kill any Khejadi (*Prosopis cineraria*) tree. Some 350 years ago the prince of Jodhpur needed wood to fuel limekilns for building a new palace, and for that purpose attempted to fell a grove of Khajadi trees in a nearby village. It is narrated that the soldiers massacred several Bishnois who hugged the trees to save them from being cut down. The appalled prince ordered his men back and granted Bishnois religion founded by Guru Jambaji in 1451 state sanction. One of the earliest conservationists, the guru believed that environment had to be protected in our own interests. Orans serve as refuge to many birds and are frequently by many animal species like Black Bucks and Indian Gazellas, which are receiving protection under the Wild Life Protection Act (1972). Many rare and endangered species are found in these groves.
- e) **Sarna - Sacred Groves of Jharkhand / Chhattisgar**  
Sarna is the term used to refer to a sacred grove in the Chotnagapur plateau (Jharkhand) and Chattisgarh (eastern Madhya Pradesh). Sarna is a religious centre of the community within the village eco-system, where the village deity resides. The

Munda, Oraon, Korwa and Roatia etc. are communities having belief in the Sarna religion. Mahadani Sarna is a type of Sarna found in many villages. Its deity is Mahadani (a male god), who is trusted to be, protecting the village and its property from various natural calamities and diseases. The villagers would regularly conduct rituals in the Sarnas. Sacrificial offerings of buffaloes are also made at an interval of three years. Women and children are prohibited from entering this grove. The prominent trees found in Sarnas are *Sohrea robusta* (Sal), *Ficus religiosa* (Peepal), *Terminalia bellerica* (Behara), *Ficus bengalensis* (Bargad) etc. The most prominent ritual associated with the Sarna, Sarhul, is celebrated in the new local calendar year (March-April), at the time of flowering of Sal tree. Other festivals like Kadleta (worship of oxen), Hareiyali (crop growth festival), and Nawakhani (crop harvest festival) are also associated with Sarna. The religious representative of the village, known as Baiga, takes care of the vegetation of the Sarna and carries out the rituals at Sarna.

**05. Ownership pattern and management of SGs:** Sacred groves come under different kinds of ownership. Sometimes these come under the control of state forest department, District councils (in Meghalaya), and Revenue departments (in Karnataka and Maharashtra). These are owned privately by family or cluster of families (in Kerala), a clan(s), and a village or a cluster of villages, temple trust (Bastar, Madhya Pradesh) or temple committee (Hariyali grove in Garhwal, Uttarakhand, (Sinha and Maikuri, 1998) etc. In Rajasthan the Orans are owned and managed by Gram Panchayat (local self-government) (Jha et al. 1998). Roy Burman (1996) mentions that among the Mahadeo Kolis of Pune district, the management is usually vested with clan elders, whereas among the Kunbis of Kohlapur district, village elders manage the groves. Clan based management are also found among many tribes viz. Santhals, Mundas, Kharia etc. Roy Burman (1996) further mentioned that many SGs in Western Maharashtra were brought under the scrutiny by forming the Paschim Mahastra Devasthanam Prabandhan Society in the 1960. Several SGs are also privately owned by a family, a group of families a clan on a trust body Chandrasekhar and Sankar (1998) give examples of such groups in Kerala. A single family owns Ollur Kavuu; the S.N.Puram owned and managed by several families and Iringole, Kabu and managed by a temple trust. There are significant variations, in terms of management of the SGs, i.e. upkeep, protection, performance of rituals and festivals, conflict resolution and harvesting of bio-mass.

#### **06. Management of sacred groves at different hierarchical level:**

The sacred groves have various hierarchical levels in terms of their geographical level. At the village or hamlet levels the inhabitants of the village and hamlet look after the sacred groves and in the multi-ethnic situation separate ethnic groups or castes manage those. Thus the sacred groves are mostly managed by the local community (es), a family or group of families, clan or an entire village. Malhotra et al. (2000) have mentioned that the local-level groves are where people from somewhat larger geographical areas usually couple of districts come to worship a particular grove. Examples of such groves are Iringole in Kerala and Kantabanshini Thakurnmaa in Orissa where local community and/or committees usually manage such groves. In the same report this has also been mentioned that the regional-level sacred groves are where people from several district/States participate. Such example is of the Sabarimala sacred grove in Kerala. Such groves are usually managed by the temple trusts. The next level of sacred groves is of Pan Indian character in which people from many parts of the country participate. The examples of such a grove could be the Hariyali sacred grove in Garhwal Himalayas (Sinha and Maikuri, 1998). Such groves tend to be larger and managed by the temple trusts.

Another categories of sacred groves are those that are considered abodes of ancestral spirits. Often these groves are, in fact, burial grounds. Such groves have been reported from number of

places. A few illustrative examples are Vidyarthi (1963) reported such groves called Masani among the Maler of Bihar; Godbole et al. (1998) report several such groves in Sangmeshwar tehsil of Ratangiri district in Maharashtra; Unnikrishnan (1990) mentions that the Theyyyam ritual in north Kerala in ancestor worship; Fernanades (1993) mentions about Sasan sacred groves as burial grounds among the Chhotanagpur tribes; Nath (1960) such groves among the Bhils of Ratanmal. It may be mentioned that sometimes a grove may serve both the functions, i.e. deity worship and ancestor worship. Unlike the grove associated with the deity (es) the groves associated with ancestor worship, in particular burial grounds do not seem to have a hierarchical pattern.

Table 3: Management of SGs at different hierarchical levels:

	Hierarchical levels of SGs	Management of SGs
V	Pan Indian	By trust
IV	Regional	By trust
III	Local	By whole village / community / local committees
II	Village	By whole village
I	Intra village	By separate communities

#### 07. Ethnicity, Culture and political system:

Both the tribals and non-tribals have the association with the institution of sacred groves. There is regional variation in terms of ethnic association. Among the tribals the sacred groves are the abodes of village tutelary deities which have numerous names in accordance with the tribes. These are much prominent among the Munday speaking tribals in Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal. In the non-tribal areas the associated gods and goddesses come from Hindu pantheon. The annual rituals and festivals are performed centering the sacred groves to propitiate and placate the deities. During these rituals the sacrifices of animals (such as fowl, goat, pig, buffalo) are made. In other sanskritized groves, offerings of vegetarian item are made. These rituals are performed are for the well being of the inhabitants, animals, crops etc. People take vows for wish fulfillment when there is a crisis, particularly bearing on health and offering mostly of terracotta of animals, birds, humans, etc.

Several scholars have reported that besides the sacred functions associated with the sacred groves, in these places several festivals are performed. For instance Nath (1960) mentions that once a year on the occasion of Deepavali offerings of food and liquor are made in groves among the Bhils of Ratanmal. Deb and Malhotra (1997) report that among the tribals of South West Bengal social gatherings take place in these groves on the occasion of Salui and Karam festival, as well as weeding ceremonies. Vidyarthi and Rai (1977) report that different tribes of Bihar celebrate their major festivals at sacred groves. Sacred groves among the Mahadeo Kolis of Pune district play a significant role in their social life, such as marriage ceremonies. Fernandes has stressed the role of sacred groves in the socialization of youth among the tribes of Chhotanagpur. Godbole et al. (1998) reports that festivals like Holi, Navratri, Devdiwali are performed in village sacred groves in Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra. Kalam (1996) mentions offering of miniature cows and buffaloes to the deity when cattle are taken ill in Iyappa Devarakadu in Kodagu; Troisi (1978) mentioned that the association of village with Jaherthan expresses the unity of the group. Paraniypya (1989) highlighted the fact that the function of the sacred groves is to mention a historical order within the community. Roy Burman (1996) observed in western Maharashtra that while among the Mahadeo Koli tribes the sacred groves

play the role of maintaining social hierarchy, based on caste and social status. The purpose and meaning attached to various rituals, ceremonies and functions performed in sacred groves are summarized in below:

Table 4: Non-economic Services Provided by SGs

Typologies	Functions provided by SGs
Sacred	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Propitiation of deity/spirits</li> <li>- Propitiation of ancestral spirits</li> <li>- Propitiation of totemic objects, biotic and abiotic</li> </ul>
Profane/Secular	
2.1 Cultural	- Provides cultural space to the community as a CPR
2.2 Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assertion of group identity</li> <li>- Assertion of group solidarity. Establishing new alliances</li> </ul>
2.3 Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gift exchange</li> <li>- Well-being of crops and animals. Well-being of community</li> </ul>
2.4 Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good rainfall</li> <li>- Good agricultural production. Success in hunting</li> </ul>
2.5 Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Moral support, guidance</li> <li>- Fertility and Paternity. Well-being of individual/family</li> </ul>

Source: Malhotra et al (2000)

## 09.Objectives :

The objectives of the paper to discuss the detail of Sacred groves with emphasis on geographical distribution and the empirical study in a field site.

## 07. Methodological Approach:

In the course of investigation the secondary sources were consulted to collect data and information for giving the vivid description from geographical & spatial distribution to ethnic culture and organizational management. Identification of the plants in the sacred groves were done by a Botanist, who published the report in a separate research paper, which have been presented and referred. The data have been referred from his published paper, The primary data have been collected from structured and semi- structured questionnaire, interviews and observations.

## 08. Sacred Groves in the Tribals of West Bengal :

(i) The Study Areas:

West Bengal is a state on the eastern part of India, having geographical area 88,752 Sq. Km., which constitutes 2.70% of the total land area of the country. It lies between lat 20°31' and 27°12' N and long 85°50' and 89°52' E. The state has two natural divisions: the north Himalayan and the south fertile alluvial Gangetic plain. There are three main rivers viz. The Teesta, the Torsa and the Jaldhaka which flow through the state and drain into Bay of Bengal. The deltaic structure at the Sunderbans estuary is another feature of interest. It has the forest area of 11,879 Sq.Km. or 13.38% of total geographical area of the state, which can be divided into three areas; forests in North Bengal (3,050 Sq.Km. or 25%), South Bengal (4,500 Sq.Km. or 38% and Mangrove forests in Sundarbans (4,262 Sq.Km. or 36%). Total population in the State is 766 per Sq.Km. Seventy-five percent of the total population is living in villages of this 24% belong to Scheduled Castes and 5.6% to Scheduled Tribes.

The area of study is known as Border Bengal, which is a micro setting. It uses in relative sense to discuss comprehensively to the western frontier portion or the south- western corner of West Bengal. In geo-physical nature the western portions of this vast tract that comprises the above districts are indistinguishable from each other. The forest-clad mountainous undulated regions are extended up to the plateau of Chhotanagpur in a series of rolling ridges and dense forests of varied intensities. In its physical background, in its geological formation, at its botanical products and its mineral wealth, in its ethnological peculiarities, in its social and political history it represents closest similarities with Chhotanagpur and striking contrasts to the eastern portion of the State. In this vast tract, the present researcher has concentrated in the western part of the district of Midnapore. The district of Midnapore is Bengal's window to the Bay of Bengal, having an area of 14,081 Sq.Km. Once it was the largest district, now it has been divided into two eastern and western.

#### (ii) Ecological Setting

As viewed on a map, the Midnapore district appears as a sloping tableland from its elevation, merging to the north and west, where it meets the lower reaches of the Chhotanagpur hills, the land slopes gradually but continually to the South and east hilly terrain. True forest regions give way to undulating ridges of scrub jungle and then in turn to broad deltas until the district land flattens out completely before merging with the Bay of Bengal. The Western lateriferous undulating tracts bear close resemblance to those of the Chhotanagpur hills. A major part of this area is covered by forests of Sal (*Shorea robusta*) trees and various other valuable trees, such as, "Kusum" (*Carthamus tinctorius*), "Piasal" (*Pterocarpus marsupium*), "Mahua" (*Madhuka latifolia*) "Pipul" (*Piper longum*), "Tamarind" (*Tamarindus belerica*), "Babul" (*Acacia arbica*), which are found in abundance in this region.

#### (iii) The tribal groups and sacred groves :

In this present research, five different tribal communities, also known as Scheduled tribes, have been selected based on their traditional economic pursuits and different cultural and historical backgrounds. They are the Lodha, the Kora, the Mahali, the Munda and the Santal. The Santals and the Mundas are the agrarian communities. The Koras are also depending upon the agricultural activities, but their traditional economy are earth-working. The Lodhas are the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups as they have the traditional pre-agricultural vocations. The Mahalis are the basket-weaving tribal group. These tribal groups are animistic in their beliefs and practices. They propitiate the benevolent and placate the malevolent Bongas or spirits with some traditional prescribed rituals.

The following table shows the detail of the festival with nature of worship, place of worship and the purposes in the tribal groups under study :

Table 05: Sacred ecology and Annual Festivals

Sl. No.	Name of the festival / worship	Month / time	Tribe concerned	Nature of worship	Place of worship	Articles required	Purposes
01.	Got puja / Shorai	Kartick (October – November) New moon day	Kora Santal Munda	Communal	Open field or the village shrine	Flower, fruits, Sundried rice, vermillion, cocks, rice beer	Acknowledgement to the protecting deities of the cattle and ancestral spirits.
02.	Baram Sitala	Poush Sankranti (Dec – Jan)	Lodha	Communal	At Baramthan and 'Maro'	Incense, resin, flowers, vermillion, fruits, makar kshirbhog, cocks	Post-harvesting ceremony. For protection from the scourge of epidemic.
03.	Sitala, Yugini Baram, Maghee	Magh (Jan-Feb) First or any auspicious day	Kora, Santal, Munda	Communal	Baram-than, Maro, Thakurthan.	Clothes, incense, resin, flowers, vermillion, fruits, makar, kshirbhog, cocks, rice beer.	Post winter harvest festival to propitiate the village tutelary deities.
04.	Salai / Sarhul Baha	Phalgun (Feb. – Mar) / on and after Holi.	Mahali, Santal	Communal	At the village shrines	New leaves, flowers of Sal & Mahul, Vermilion, cocks, rice beer	To offer the newly grown leaves before use
05.	Bah Parab / Sarhul	Chaitra (Mar-April / 1 <sup>st</sup> or 3 <sup>rd</sup> Sat.	Kora, Munda	Communal	At the village shrines	Sal and Mahul, leaves, incense, flowers, sweets cocks, rice beer.--	Offering of the new leaves and flowers before use
06.	Sitala, Yugini Mah More	Vaisakh (Apr-May)	Lodha, Kora, Santal	Communal	Maro and at the village shrines	Cloths, incense, fruits, flowers, sweets, kshirbhog, vermillion, cocks, rice beer, goats	To propitiate the presiding deities of the village and epidemic

07.	Uli-Kanthar	Jaistha (May-Jun)	Munda	Communal	At the village shrine	Seasonal fruits, flowers, vermilion, and cocks, rice beer.	To offer the seasonal fruits to village deities.
08.	Janthal, Asharia, Chandi	Ashwar (Jun-Jul)	Munda, Kora, Santal	Communal	At the village shrines	Seasonal fruits flowers, vermilion, cocks, rice beer.	Prayer to the village deities before sowing

# SOCIAL SYSTEM, SACRED ECOLOGY AND TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS

## SACRED ECOLOGY

## SOCIAL GROUPING

## PERFORMER

Sacred grove

Village

Village priest

Court yard / open field

Family

Senior most members

Inside the main room cow shed

Household

Head of the household

Anywhere

Individual

Medicine man

## 09. Sacred place:

The sacred place of a tribal village envisages two things, viz., (a) sacred area and (b) sacred centre. The former tells us about the particular portion of the locality, which is dedicated to gods and deities, and the latter the particular places or spots where the gods reside.

The geography of sacred places in the tribals is mainly confined to two areas, i.e., (i) the household and (ii) in and around the villages. These are the basic units for the performance of most of the rituals and ceremonies among the tribals in India.

Tribals distinguish a place where the gods and deities live. They might be under the trees, water or mountains. Their gods are not centred in a particular object of the village but are spread all over the region. The household deity, who is generally their ancestral spirit, resides in the kitchen or part of the hut or house, the village deity's abode is either in the middle of the village or on an earthen altar, situated near the village - priest's house or on the outskirts of the village. The god of forest lives in the nearby jungles, where every stream, river, ditch, hill or hillock, old trees are the abodes of numerous other deities.

After locating the sacred area we come to a single spot where many varieties of rituals and devotional activities are carried on. The spots are called sacred centres. Some tribes of Chhotanagpur believe in the 'Sarna' or the sacred place in the forms of sacred grove or a holy spot (Hembrom, 1983). All the tribals of Chotanagpur worship at the sacred grove called *Jaher or Jayer*. The grove is always associated with a cluster of sal trees (*Shorea robusta*) located at the outskirts of a tribal village and the concept and rituals centring round the sal grove (*Jaher or Sarna*) have helped to unify the heterogeneous mass of tribals into a solid block which act the tribals from the non-tribals.

The Sacred groves were studied in the Paschim Medinipur districts of West Bengal state in the eastern parts of the Indian Sub-continent in the villages of five Mundari speaking tribal groups.

### (i) In the forests:

In the village Shitli, the Santals are seen to perform the worship of Birbonga, a deity in the name of forest, in the middle of jungle nearby on the day of Chait Sankranti, i.e., the last day of Bengali calendar year before the annual hunt. The annual hunt is known as '*Dilli shikar*'. The holy spot is under a pair of Sal (*Shorea robusta*) and Mahul (*Bassia latifolia*) trees. A Lodha family of village Birkar propitiates 'Satbahina' in the middle of the forest by the side of the river Kaliaghai under bel or wood-apple tree.

### (i) Village Shrine:

The elaborate rituals are performed during major festivals at the village shrines in the middle of the village. Instead of sacred groves, one or two uncut trees in the middle of the village are considered as the village shrine, known as *Baram than* or *Jahera* and four-walled mud-built thatched huts, known as 'Maro' is considered a temple. The details of these village shrines are given below:

**(i) Baram than:** The Lodhas and the Mundas give names of the village shrines. This is situated under various trees like banyan, wood-apple, pipul, margosa, babul etc. The name of the 'baram than' is given after the name of the deity baram. This is the most important sacred place where some stone-blocks are placed that represent deities like Dharam, Garam, Baram, Chandi along with terracotta or clay figurines. In some villages, as in village Pichhaboni and Daharpur, circular earthen platforms are built surrounding the tree. In the same villages many a number of Baramthan are seen and in village Birkar there are four sacred spots of Baramthan. In the village Daharpur, besides the main village shrine under Kankul tree, there is another baram than under a Palas tree. In village Pichaboni, the villagers are divided into two halves having two baramthan on the basis of their allegiance to two factions of the communist party of India - C.P.I. & C.P.I.(M).

**(ii) Jahera:** The cluster of Sarjom popularly known as Sal (*Shorea robusta*) and Matkam (*Bassia latifolia*) indicating the isolate entity of pristine Santal village is not visible in this ecological setting due to scarcity

of the above trees. The Mahalis and the Koras, the offshoots of the Santals- call the sacred Jahera too. Due to maximum interaction with the Hindu neighbours, the Mahalis occasionally describe this village shrine as Garamthan, the distorted version of Gramthan or the village shrine. In the two adjoining Mahali villages- Kotaigarh and Basudevapur-they have a Gram than or the village shrine each under the trees like Saora, pipul etc.

**(iii) Maro:** Goddess Sitala is the most venerated deity in this locality. She is installed in a four-sloped mud-built thatched or tiled house. It has a temple infrastructure. All the tribes, except the Santals under survey have built such shrines. Within the shrine there is an earthen-platform upon which they place green coconut and loincloth and other ritual articles as offerings.

Besides these sacred places, a good number of sacred centres outside the village and the neighbouring areas are taken into their belief system. Besides in the village Shitli the tribal pay homage to the Baidyanath-dham, a sacred centre in the forest between the villages Shitli and Amdiha. A number of Kali *mandaps* (pandals), the temple at the border of Bangla -Orissa, the temple of Brahmanidevi at Naryangarh, Kalushar temple in Nayagram, Guptamani temple of Jhargram, Duarsini of Keshiary, Malabhanja temple of Kharagpur by the side of National High way, Daharchandi of the village Daharpur, Joychandi of Pithalkathi, Bhimtala by the side of the path in between Asnaboni and Fulgeriah in addition to many Siva temples in different villages within and outside the Narayangarh block, are recognized by them as the sacred places and these are visited by the people frequently.

#### 10. Biodiversity Conservation:

Due to continued protection in socio-religious grounds the sacred groves provide optimum conditions congenial for plant growth and survival. The following table shows the species available in the sacred groves or shrines, giving their local name and uses:

**Table 06: Plants growing in the Sacred Grove.**

Plants	SL. No.	Species	Local name	Uses
Trees	1	Alangium salviifolium	Ankar	Timber
	2	Buchanania lanzan	Pial	Timber
	3	Butea monosperma	Palas	Ornamental & Medicinal
	4	Cleistanthus collinus	Parashi	Medicinal
	5	Diospyros melanoxylon	Kend	Edible fruits & sacred
	6	Holarrhena pubescens	Kurchi	Medicinal
	7	Madhuca indica	Mahua	Timber, edible fruits, making beverages, sacred & medicinal
	8	Phoenix sylvestris	Khejur	Edible fruits, medicinal
	9	Shorea robusta	Sal	Timber, sacred
	10	Terminalia chebula	Haritari	Medicinal
Shrubs	1	Abutilon indicum	Patari	Medicinal
	2	Cassia occidentalis	Keshut	Medicinal
	3	Clerodendrum viscosum	Ghetu	Medicinal
	4	Lantana camara L.	Putus	Fruits edible
	5	Sida acuta	Berela	Medicinal
	6	Sida rhombifolia L.	-	Medicinal
Herbs	1	Achyranthes aspera	Apang	Medicinal
	2	Aerva lanata	Chaldhoa	Medicinal
	3	Curculigo orchioides	Talmuli	Medicinal
	4	Elephantopus scaber	Samdulum	Medicinal

	5	<i>Evolvulus nummularius</i>	-	Medicinal
	6	<i>Hyptis suaveolens</i>	Bara Bantulsi	Medicinal
	7	<i>Jatropha curcas</i>	Sada Bherenda	Medicinal
	8	<i>Jatropha gossypifolia</i>	Bherenda	Medicinal
	9	<i>Portulacca oleracea</i>	Barolonia	Medicinal
	10	<i>Rauvolfia tetraphylla</i>	Gandha gokul	Medicinal
	11	<i>Ruellia tuberosa</i>	-	Medicinal
	12	<i>Triumfetta rhomboidea</i>	Banokra	Medicinal
Climbers	1	<i>Abrus precatorius</i>	Kurch	Medicinal
	2	<i>Aristolochia indica</i>	Iswarmul	Medicinal
	3	<i>Capparis zeylanica</i>	Rohini	Sacred
	4	<i>Cissampelos pareira</i>	-	Medicinal
	5	<i>Combretum decandrum</i>	Atang	Sacred
	6	<i>Ichnocarpus frutescens</i>	Dudhelata	Medicinal & basket making
	7	<i>Tinospora cordifolia</i>	Gulanha	Medicinal

Source : Bhakat et al 2011

## 11. Conclusion

The Sacred grove representing sacred ecology is based on the community institution with support of indigenous knowledge from hoary past in the indigenous lands of India. The Sacred ecology is constituted by an area consisting of a single tree, single pond to a cluster of trees, which is set apart from the surrounding ecology delimited and protected by religious beliefs and practices. These are numerous with different names in different places. These are found in varied size. In the present days under Community Management System, these are also known as 'Community Conservation Areas' (CCA), viz. Kans, Kovil kadu, Maw bukhar, Oran, Sarna etc. In the traditional ownership pattern before the notification of the forest lands as State property the sacred groves were owned by the community, but present day they are found in the ownership of common pool resources under state management system. In few cases they are privately owned or owned by a cluster of families, lineage or clan as in North-east India. Both the tribals and non-tribals have the association with the institution of sacred groves. But in the tribal lands these associations are most prominent as the sacred groves are the abode of village tutelary deities, where various sacred functions are performed. The community cultural practices are still in vogue in the annual village festivals or rituals in various parts of the country. Some changes due to socio-economic progress of the tribal communities are also occurred. However, these traditional institutions evince robust institutional arrangements for conservation of bio-diversity as environmental sustainability as well as social sustainability under different social, economic, ethnic and political systems. There are huge biodiversities are conserved and growing in the sacred groves.

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