From the ENVIS Desk...

ENVIS Centre on the Conservation of Ecological and Sacred Sites of India at C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre has expanded the existing database on various aspects of Indian ecological heritage by primary as well as secondary sources. The existing database includes information on:

- 6825 Sacred Groves & Gardens
- 41 Sacred Waterbodies
- 285 Sacred Tanks
- 84 Sacred Plants
- 45 Sacred Animals
- 25 Sacred Mountains & Hills

We are constantly adding material and updating primary and secondary data. The website is inter-active and dynamic. It is visited by environmentalists and environmental historians from all over the world and is quoted extensively.

The area of eco-heritage is vast and an akshaya patra of information. I would like to see more university departments encouraging students to take up research in local ecological traditions. That is the only way we can document traditions that are disappearing beneath the onslaught of development. I must land the few committed journalists who document every ecological tradition they encounter – religious sites, festivals and traditions.

We are currently trying to document the ecological traditions of Orissa and West Bengal. I invite scholars and interested persons to share their knowledge and information with us.

Dr. Nanditha Krishna
ENVIS Co-Ordinator

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Islam is a monotheistic faith which also believes in some aspects of nature worship. The crescent moon occupies great importance in Islam. The Sacred Black Stone at Kaaba, which is known as qibla, is the focus point to which all Muslims turn when they pray. Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in India was a great lover of nature. In his autobiography, he has given excellent descriptions, of the rich natural heritage of this country. The Mughal emperors lavished money on elaborate water gardens in which many of them, including Jahangir were buried. Akbar lies in a garden tomb at Sikandra near Agra.

In the enrichment of Goa’s culture, Islam has played an important role. The Shahouri Masjid at Ponda was built in 1560 CE by Ibrahim Adilshah of Bijapur. Adjacent to this mosque, there is a well constructed masonry tank. Before the Portuguese conquest of Ponda, the mosque and the tank were surrounded by a large garden facing the mosque with many fountains. A similar mosque with masonry is also found in Surla, Bicholim. The Mandovi River which is very close to the tank, has saline water, whereas the tank has the potable water.

Sufis are mystics of Islam, who came into existence in the 7th century. They developed religious brotherhoods devoted to the idea of mystical union with God. Sufi traditions have made noteworthy contributions to bridging the gap between the Hindus and Muslims in Goa. At many places in Goa, there are religious shrines established in honour of the pirs or saints. These pirs popularised Sufi teachings and human values. Names of villages like Parye, Priol and Pirna are related to the pir. The great Maratha ruler Sambhaji donated land for meeting the day-to-day expenditure of the gurgah dedicated to Gazi Abdul Khan Shahid Pir.

The tombstones of some of these pirs lie in the shadow of lush green trees. The trees are not cut while doing renovation work, since many are believed to be associated with the pir. On the left bank of the river, on the way to Sanquelim, after crossing the main bridge there is a small religious shrine built in honour of Hazrat Allaudin Shah Rifai, a pious Sufi saint originally from Khanapur of Karnataka. Every year, in the month of April, the annual Urs is organised. This shrine lies in the soothing shadow of trees like savar (bembex ceiba), kumyo, mango, and two tamarind trees. The local Muslims believe that these were planted by the pir and hence they consider them as sacred. Today, when trees are cut

* Mr. Rajendra P. Kerkar was recently awarded the C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre award for Environmental Education for the year 2009.

www.ecoheritage.cpreec.org  
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in the name of development, all these trees are protected and respected mainly because they are associated with the pir.

There is one area called ‘Pirachi Kond’ with deep water inside the river. It is associated with Hazrat Jangali Shah Pir who was one of the followers of Hazrat Allaudin Pir. At Sanquelim, there is a durgah of Babur Pir on the left bank of Valvant River. While offering invocation to Bhumkadevi of Parye, reference is made to Babur Pir. Earlier, the procession of Ghodemodni, a ritualistic folk dance, was sittinghe Durgah and expressing gratitude to the pir. There are sacred trees protected near the durgah by local Muslims. In the kabarsthan (graveyard) of Keri, Sattari, an aged Alistonia Scholaris tree is protected. There is also one area of deep water inside the Kalati river known as ‘Pirachi Kond’.

Goa’s Muslims have several ecological traditions which have preserved the natural environment. There is a need to rekindle interesting the conservation of both cultural as well as ecological heritage.

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**PART II PROCEEDINGS OTHER THAN QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS (XIV LOK SABHA)**

**Title: Need for a national action plan to restore sacred groves in the country.**

**DR. K. DHANARAJU (TINDIVANAM):**

Mr. Deputy-Speaker, Sir, biodiversity is the cornerstone of life. The tangible and intangible benefits derived from the living organism and their varieties and their associations are immensely vast and varied. Wild species and their varieties have made substantial contribution to agriculture, medicine and industry. The concept of conservation of biodiversity is to conserve biological resources. The sacred groves are one of the finest examples of natural resource management wherein the innate native wisdom guided their protection from biotic exploitation. Sacred groves are patches of forests dedicated to a local spirit or deity and protected by cultural traditions and religious precepts. Such sacred groves are available in all parts of the country. For example, 82 groves with floristic values are available in Pudukottai and Tiruchirappalli districts of Tamil Nadu over the years. C.P. Ramaswamy Foundation of Chennai and M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation in Chennai have also resurrected several denuded groves and successfully restored them to their original status in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. The coastal sector covering Pondicherry, Cuddalore and Villupuram districts, which belong to my constituency stretching over 350 square kms. has about 163 groves, of which 33 have rich biodiversity values. There are hundreds of groves with biodiversity potential in Tamil Nadu, but these are facing intense pressure from human exploitation and faulty management policies.

Originally, the groves were aimed at protecting the local biodiversity through taboos and restrictions and it was hailed as ‘vernacular conservation’, but slowly the cultural manifestations in the form of rites, rituals, worships and festivals have become colourful, commensurate with elaborations of temple complexes. Understandably, when cultural traditions soared high, conservation ethos suffered heavily on account of economic improvement and slackness, neither the groves are protected nor maintained. Values of groves are islets of local biodiversity, tiny toots of endemic asylums and refugia for relict species. It is time for us to carry initiative into the villages. Sacred groves can be integrated into schemes under national biodiversity strategy action plan. The Ministry of Environment and Forest should send a directive to all the State Governments to take up the restoration of sacred groves on a priority basis so that the villages are restored of their natural heritage.
‘Sacred groves’ falsify govt contention

In Garhwal and Kumaon, numerous large and small patches of forests are protected and preserved as “sacred groves” by communities. Villagers, through ‘divine sanction’, are stopped from harming any vegetation in these groves. It is utterly wrong to blame the recent forest fires in the state on villagers who are devoted to conservation.

Forest officials blame villagers for the recent spread of forest fires in Uttarakhand causing devastation in large areas. However, the role played by the people of Uttarakhand in conserving, protecting and nurturing the forests can’t be questioned. Hundreds of sacred groves are protected by the people as a matter of faith. The death of nine persons while trying to douse forest fires in the past month point to the efforts of the common man to protect their forests. In Garhwal and Kumaon numerous large and small patches of forests are protected and preserved as “sacred groves” by communities. Villagers, through “divine sanction” are stopped from harming any vegetation in these groves. Such groves have been thriving since centuries. These sacred groves vary from a few trees, a few square yards to several square kilometres. Most notable are the Haryali Devi grove in Rudraprayag (5.5 sq km), Shikhar in Bageshwar district (about 4 sq km), Binsar in Almora district (about 3 sq km) and Gagar in Nainital district. It is popular belief that within these groves even axing a branch of a tree may invite the wrath of the deity.

“This is a form of religious sanction which discourages any form of cutting or lopping of trees within these sacred spaces,” explains Tarun Joshi, an environmentalist. Says Dr AP Singh, associate professor at the National Institute for Administrative Research (NIAR), Mussoorie: “The sacred groves are a method adopted by local communities to accord protection to ecosystems by invoking divine sanction to prevent violation of norms.” He believes that “the communities of Uttarakhand, with their wealth of empirical knowledge gained through experience, have been using religion as a tool to protect and preserve critical ecosystems by designating these as sacred.” Studies show that in sacred spaces like Haryali Devi, 32 km from Gauchar, the lopping, felling, grazing, collection of grass or medicinal plants or any other kind of human interference within the sacred grove is prohibited. Notably, the entire area designated as “sacred” in Haryali falls in the reserve forest area. This weakens the claim of the forest department that the communities of Uttarakhand do not protect reserve forests. Similarly, near the Jageshwar Temple in Almora, an area around the temple has been designated as sacred and since generations no cutting or lopping of trees is allowed here. Dense deodar forests thrive in the area. “Village communities have wisely used religion as a tool to draw a protective ring around the forests with the objective of protecting/preserving critical ecosystems,” says Joshi.

He informs that although the concept of sacred groves is ancient and some sacred groves are centuries old, the people of Uttarakhand have come forward and reinitiated this practice. He informs that the practice of dedicating forests to a deity in the Chowkhuri and Dharamgarh areas of Kumaon was initiated in early 1990. Forest areas adjoining villages were demarcated as sacred and cordoned off so that there was no human intrusion into those areas. Interestingly, the entire village community may decide at a meeting to dedicate their forests to a deity. This is usually done in case of degraded areas facing severe ecological pressures. At these meetings, the time period is decided (generally between 5 and 10 years) depending on the period needed for regeneration of the forest area. The communities retain some patches to meet their requirements and on a designated date they visit the temple of a nearby deity and submit a letter of intent to the deity.

Even more interesting, some villages use a revenue stamp. The letter mentions the area to be dedicated and the period of dedication. The document is signed by all members of the village. Subsequently, flags and streamers are brought from the temple to mark the boundary of the area. “We have observed that there is zero violation of norms by villagers as everyone is god-fearing,” observes Laxman Singh Dhami, a sarpanch. “Such initiatives help support the natural regeneration process in these areas and within a span of eight years the area is once again replete with dense vegetation,” adds Dhami. Once the period of dedication is over, the villagers again visit the temple and “take back” their forests from the deity which are then used as per the rules and regulations decided by the gram sabha. “This concept is fast spreading to other areas. In Nakuri and Gangolihaat area alone more than 100 gram panchayats recently dedicated their Van Panchayat/or civil soyam lands to local deities,” says Joshi. Forest officials of Uttarakhand seem oblivious of such practices otherwise they would not blame the traditionally conservationist communities of Uttarakhand for causing forest fires. The department may well take a leaf out of the book on people’s history and in order to deal with forest fires more efficiently look for similar divine support.

(Courtesy: The Tribune - May 14, 2009)
Nag Panchami celebrated with traditional fervour

ALLAHABAD: Naga Panchami was celebrated with traditional fervour and gaiety on Sunday. Devotees started visiting Mankameshwar, Tatkeeshwar Mahadeo, Padila Mahadeo, Shivkuti and other temples of Lord Shiva since morning to pay obeisance and offer flowers. Explaining the significance of the festival, religious teacher Vipul Tripathi said that Naga Panchami is celebrated in most parts of India. It is celebrated on Panchami in Shravan month. On this day, they worship Naga Devata (cobras). People go to temples and snake pits and worship the snakes. They offer milk and silver jewellery to the cobras to get protection from all evils. They also fast. This festival is to celebrate the day when Lord Krishna defeated the serpent Kaliya. On this day swings are put up and people enjoy themselves. Married women visit their parents during this occasion.

The festival is also celebrated as Gudia fair with men, women and children visiting the fair and indulging in festivities at different places like the Katra market, where the fair is organised annually. On this occasion, activists of Pragatisheel Mahila Sangathan also undertook a campaign where hundreds of women, girl students and children took out a rally from Sadwan to Misrabandhu under Bara tehsil where they held a mass meeting. The children were carrying placards, stating 'Don't beat us', 'Don't drown us'. They were also carrying posters and placards which depicted small dolls giving various messages. They appealed to the people to struggle against exploitation of women. At Loknath Vyayamshala, a wrestling competition was organised in which around 45 wrestlers from the city and adjoining areas took part.

(Courtesy: The Times of India - July 26, 2009)

Unfortunately, cobras don’t drink milk and many die during this festival after being force-fed milk.

- Editor

Let sacred rivers flow to enrich and enable

We offer prayers of thanksgiving to water as a river stored in a sacred pot, the kalash, because water is a blessing; it is life-giving and life-sustaining. On a metaphorical plane, the cleansing power of water is believed to help remove inner disturbances. The waters absorb our negative thoughts when we take a dip in the river. The river then discharges those negative thoughts and the waters are purified when rivers undertake penance on the banks of rivers. The river waters are sacred passages that connect sinners with holy men and women and River Bankis are suffused with the spiritual energy of those who meditate there. The superior physical, chemical and organic qualities of river waters arise from the waters rubbing against stones, gravel, herbs and plants and their mingling with air. Certain curative qualities of the River Ganga, for example, arise from the presence of medicinal herbs found in the Himalayan range of mountains. These waters also contain micro levels of beneficial radioactivity.

It is necessary that the physical qualities of waters of the rivers are kept pure in order that the deeper spiritual qualities are manifest. Such interrelationship is explained in the light of Patanjali Ashhtanga Yoga. Just as eight types of cleanliness are necessary for the soul to rise to Godhead, it is necessary to maintain the physical, chemical and biological qualities of the rivers in their pristine form to make it possible for them to absolve us of our sins. We must promote economic activities to alleviate the suffering of the poor and the less privileged. However, economic development or activities associated with artha or the material plane should be pursued in a way that they uphold long-term social good and protect the environment, establishing dharma. The way forward is to develop the service sector in a way that it is in tune with environmental harmony, utilising minimum energy. Nature trips will benefit students and patients who can experience first hand the benefits of natural water bodies and their environs. Urban sewage, even if treated, should not be discharged into rivers. Rather, they should be utilised for irrigation purposes. The hill areas need to be protected from indiscriminate activity in the name of development and efforts should be stepped up to keep the hillides free of garbage. If the spiritual and natural quality of rivers is diluted near their origins in the hills and the waters are diverted to tunnels, canals and reservoirs, the rivers tend to lose their contact with natural surroundings and ambience, and in the process, lose some of the spiritual qualities that render the waters sacred. Drinking water being supplied from rivers to urban areas ought not to be at the cost of endangering the river itself. It should be a gentle arrangement, rather like the Sun taking water from rivers and lakes and turning it into rain, in a way that nothing is wasted. During the monsoon season, when there is increased flow of water in rivers, some water may be diverted and stored in other off-line reservoirs for use as drinking water and for irrigation in winter and summer months without ever disturbing the main flow of the river. Instead of raising embankments, river water must be allowed to spread naturally and replenish Earth. Floods perform valuable functions of providing silt for flood-recession agriculture and recharging groundwater. People should be encouraged to live with the difficulties and benefits associated with floods. Downstream stretches may be dredged, like King Bhagiratha had done in the past, to provide waters to ports. Human effort must be to increase the flow of the rivers rather than obstruct it through manmade structures such as dams, barrages and embankments.

(Courtesy: The Times of India - July 31, 2009)

Investigations were carried out in 26 sacred groves of the district of Bankura of West Bengal during 2006 to 2007. 114 plant species were recorded from those groves including 102 dicots and 12 monocots. Among them, species of trees were 62, shrubs 14, herbs 23, lianas 04, climbers 10, epiphytes 01. Sacred groves totally cover an area of 8.2 hectares. The major tribal groups in these areas are Santals and Koramudis; others are Bedias and Mahalis. The main festival of the Santals is ‘Sarul’ under the canopy of *Shorea robusta*. The festival ‘Ashari’ is performed before planting and ‘Maghi’ after harvesting paddy are common to all the tribes. The dominant tree species observed were *Shorea robusta*, *Butea monosperma* and *Madhuca longifolia* var. *latifolia*. The dominant family in the study are was Combretaceae with 07 species. The family Dipterocarpaceae has the maximum number of individuals (181). Papilionaceae, Euphorbiaceae and Rubiaceae also have a good representation. These groves are good reserves of 28 medicinal plants. About 60% of the trees were confined to the height class 10-15 meters and 40% were less than 15-20 meters. The floristic diversity was found to be 0.99. Importance Value Index (IVI) of *Shorea robusta* has 38.94, other sub-dominant forms like *Butea monosperma* have 22.04, *Madhuca longifolia* var. *latifolia* have 21.13 and *Holoptelea integrifolia* have 15.17. To maintain the functions, values and attributes of sacred groves effective conservation and management practices are required.

*Keywords: Biodiversity, Ethno-botany, Sacred Groves, Bankura District, West Bengal.*


Most people follow and are influenced by some kind of spiritual faith. We examined two ways in which religious faiths can in turn influence biodiversity conservation in protected areas. First, biodiversity conservation is influenced through the direct and often effective protection afforded to wild species in sacred natural sites and in semi-natural habitats around religious buildings. Sacred natural sites are almost certainly the world’s oldest form of habitat protection. Although some sacred natural sites exist inside official protected areas, many thousands more form a largely unrecognized “shadow” conservation network in many countries throughout the world, which can be more stringently protected than state-run reserves. Second, faiths have a profound impact on attitudes to protection of the natural world through their philosophy, teachings, investment choices, approaches to land they control, and religious-based management systems. We considered the interactions between faiths and protected areas with respect to all 11 mainstream faiths and to a number of local belief systems. The close links between faiths and habitat protection offer major conservation opportunities, but also pose challenges. Bringing a sacred natural site into a national protected-area system can increase protection for the site, but may compromise some of its spiritual values or even its conservation values. Most protected-area managers are not trained to manage natural sites for religious purposes, but many sacred natural sites are under threat from cultural changes and habitat degradation. Decisions about whether or not to make a sacred natural site an “official” protected area therefore need to be made on a case-by-case basis. Such sites can play an important role in conservation inside and outside official protected areas. More information about the conservation value of sacred lands is needed as is more informed experience in integrating these into wider conservation strategies. In addition, many protected-area staff need training in how to manage sensitive issues relating to faiths where important faith sites occur in protected areas.

*Keywords: Conservation, Protected Areas, Religion and Sacred Natural Sites*

Field studies on floristic composition and ethnobotanical practices of the sacred groves of in and around Pallapatty village, Madurai district of Tamil Nadu were undertaken. A total of 133 plant species belonging to 113 genera distributed among 51 families were recorded. The mode of mythical and therapeutic uses and conservation practices of these plants by the local people has been discussed.

*Keywords: Floristic composition, Ethnobotany, Sacred groves, Conservation, Tamil Nadu*


Sacred groves (kavukal) are seen throughout Kerala, having varied forms, cultural practices and belief systems. The vegetation in the groves is highly varied viz. mangroves, fresh water swamps, or other tropical forest types. Deities worshipped in the groves are also highly varied. One such type is the sacred grove dedicated to serpent God and serpent worship is considered to be one of the oldest and most prevalent forms of nature worship in the world. While serpent worship is seen throughout India, only in Kerala, people worship serpent in the sacred groves dedicated to them called, Sarpa kavu. The study brought out three broad types of groves in Palakkad, viz. the primitive, the recent and the sacraments devoid of groves. Worship, rites and rituals associated with the grove include both primitive ones like Noorum palum, Kalemezhuthupattu and the Vedic types like Sarpa bali and Payasa homam. Beside these, the myths and beliefs associated with serpent worship are also discussed in detail. The study brings to light the existence of groves devoid of any vegetation, indicating that sacred groves can be relics from a past socio-cultural epoch, which served to transmit the cultural heritage generations from pre-historic time. Conservation of natural resources in the past involved many taboos, rituals and other religious practices and sacred groves was such a traditional socio-cultural mechanism aiming at nature conservation that integrated socio-cultural aspects for conservation.

*Keywords: Traditional Knowledge, Ethnomedicine, Sacred groves, kavukal, Serpent worship, Conservation, Kerala*


The life of Jaunsaris, a tribal community of Jaunsar-Bawar of Dehra Dun District depends mainly on farming and forest resources. Farming in Jaunsar is of subsistence nature and heavily depending on rains. Therefore utilisation of forest resources is the key for survival of the people of Jaunsar. This study provides details about the use of forest resources ranging from wild edible food to the non food items used by these hilly tribals. Data was collected based on a pre-tested questionnaire containing arrays of forest resources being utilised by them from 302 randomly selected households distributed in 34 villages of the region. This paper discusses about the use of forest resources and its contribution for the survival of the community. It classified forest resources based on characteristics of use by the Jaunsaris as consumption goods, durable goods, agricultural inputs, inputs for other production and asset formation. The proportion of households using forest resources has also been explored under different categories. Study clearly showed the dependency of this community on the forest, utilising its resources for different requirements. Depletion of the forest is very critical for the survival of the Jaunsaris. Therefore, policy makers must consider those policy instruments, which should conserve the forest besides providing the alternate solutions for these resources.
Keywords: Jaunsar-Bawar, Uttarakhand, Forest resources, Forest utilisation, tribals, Forest-dependent community.


Water resources regime in Kumaon Himalaya is a product of its specific environmental conditions. Major river systems, lakes along with a plethora of streams and springs are the main sources of water in this region. In pre-colonial Kumaon, communities took pride in their water systems and the local communities had the right of ownership over the use of local natural resources. They managed their water bodies on their own and this gave birth to a unique water harvesting civilization. Water was revered and regarded as sacred as is evidenced by the exquisite ornamentations and architecture of the structures around water bodies. An amazing aspect of these structures and systems is their longevity. But the colonial intrusion disturbed the community mode of management and gave precedence to private and state property rights over common property rights. The situation did not change even after Independence. The paper throws light on the water harvesting methods and the linkages of water with forests. It also focuses on the watershed approach for managing water resources in the present scenario.

Keywords: Traditional knowledge, Water management, Kumaon Himalayas

M.Amirthalingam participated in the 3rd SSEASR Conference, organised by South and Southeast Asian Association for the Study of Culture and Religion in collaboration with Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) and Universitas Hindu Indonesia (UNHI), Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia from June 3–6, 2009. A total of 250 delegates from 63 countries participated in the conference. Amirthalingam presented a paper on “Artificial Irrigation Systems in South India and Cambodia” in the XI post noon session on 5th June 2009.

Dr.Nanditha Krishna, Director, C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre, participated in First World Congress of Environmental History 2009, organised by the International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations (ICEHO), Roskilde University and Malmo University, Copenhagen, Denmark, from August 4–8, 2009. There were more than 500 attendees from all over the world. Dr.Nanditha Krishna presented a paper on “Impact of Environmental Change on Indigenous people in the Nilgiris”.

Keywords: Traditional knowledge, Water management, Kumaon Himalayas

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Readers are welcome to contribute articles, photographs with details, news clippings, etc., pertaining to the Ecological heritage for publishing in our subsequent newsletters. Please send your views and opinions.

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