



A Survey of Sacred Groves of Devipatan Region of U.P.

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Introduction

India has a long tradition of prudent use and wise conservation of all resources that are useful to people. Forests have been the lifeline for forest-dwelling communities since ancient times. One method for conservation of this green resource has been the creation of sacred groves which were dedicated to local deity. As a tradition means of biodiversity conservation, these groves can be considered the ancient equivalent of natural sanctuaries where all forms of living creatures are given protection by a deity. No one is permitted to cut any tree or plant, kill animals and birds, or harm any form of life in this area.

Sacred groves comprise patch of forests or natural vegetation from a few trees to forests of several acres that are usually dedicated to local folk deities or tree spirits. These species are protected by local communities because of their religious and traditional rituals that run through several generations. These groves are scattered all over the country and are referred by different names in different parts of country. Around 14000 sacred groves have been reported from all over the country which acts as reservoir of rare flora and fauna. Experts believe that the total no of sacred groves could be more than 100,000 numbers.

The present study is an attempt to document the sacred groves found in Devipatan region of U.P. Devipatan region comprises 4 revenue districts viz Gonda, Balrampur, Shrawasti and Bahraich. This region lies between 81° 30" to 81° 65" E longitudes

and 26° 47" to 28° 24" N latitude. This region comes under Terai zone of Uttar Pradesh. On the northern boundary of the region, Nepal is situated.

Materials and method

The extensive surveys were carried out in different areas of district Bahraich, Shrawasti, Balrampur and Gonda during February-March 2011. Historical aspects were studied with the help of local people and inventory is prepared. The documentation including name of deity, extent and status of total area has also been carried out.

Enumeration

The study was undertaken in sacred groves as following two categories:

1. **Traditional Sacred groves:** The place where the village deity resides and deity is represented by an elementary symbol of bricks or stones. At some places sculptures of animals like elephant and horse are prepared with mud.
2. **Temple Groves:** The groves are created artificially around temple and conserved.

Traditional sacred groves: In Devipatan region, almost all the villages have a place where village deity resides, commonly known as kalithan. Besides, inside the forest area, the local neighbours and tribes like Tharus demarcate some area for their deity commonly known as Samay Than, Vansatti Devi and Bhairav Baba etc. The cutting of trees and hunting of animals in these area are prohibited. The traditional sacred groves in Devipatan region are listed below :



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Van Satti Devi in Srawasti Forest Area



Van Satti Devi in Srawasti Forest Area



Samay Mata Sthan in Srawasti Forest



Mardev Baba Sthan in Reserve Forest



Karikot



S. No.	Local Name of Sacred groves	Location	Deity	Status	Area	No.
1.	Samay Mai Ka Sthan	Murtiha Rage (Katarniya Ghat Div.)	Goddess	Reserved Forest	1.0 acre	01
2.	Mota Baba	(Katarniya Ghat Range) (Katarniya Ghat Div.)	Shiv (God)	-do-	2.5acre	01
3.	Pataal Choochi	-do-	-do-	-do-	1.0 acre	01
4.	Chakia Maata	Chakia Range Bahraich F.D.	Goddess	-do-	1.0 acre	01
5.	Bauri Samay	Nanpara Bahraich F.D.	Goddess	-do-	1.0 acre	01
6.	Kapoore Baba	Nanpara Bahraich F.D	Shiv	-do-	1.0 acre	01
7.	Soonta Baba	Rupaideeha Bahraich	Shiv	-do-	1.0 acre	01
8.	Samaymai Ka Sthan	Bhinga Range, Shravasti F.D. Compt. 35, 40	Goddess	-do-	0.5 acre	02
9.	Van Satti Devi	Bhinga Range, Shravasti F.D. Compt. 36	Goddess	-do-	0.5 acre	01
10.	Samay Mai Ka Sthan	Shravasti Range (Tal Baghel)	Phoomati Mata	-do-	0.25 acres	01
11.	Jagpati Dham	Kakadari Range Shravasti F.D.	Shiv	-do-	2.5 acres	01
12.	Samay Mai Ka Sthan	Kuana Range (Gonda)	Goddess	-do-	3.0 acre	06
13.	Van Satti Devi	Kuana Range (Gonda)	Goddess	-do-	0.25 acre	01
14.	Vansatti Devi	Tikari Compt. 4 & Vested forest (Gonda)	Goddess	-do-	1.0 acre	02
15.	Van Satti Devi	Sohelwa Balrampur	Goddess	-do-	0.25 acre	01
16.	Samay Mai Ka Sthan	Sohelwa Balrampur	Goddess	-do-	1.0 acre	02
17.	Son Pathari	East Sohelwa (Balrampur)	Shiv	-do-	2.5 acre	01
18.	Vibhuti Nath	East Sohelwa (Balrampur)	Shiv	-do-	2.5 acres	01
19.	Van Satti Devi	Bhabhar (Sohelwa) Balrampur	Goddess	-do-	2.0 acres	05

Temple sacred groves

The following temples are created artificially and

many tree species are planted around the temple and conserved.



Sl. No.	Name of Sacred groves	Location	Deity	Status	Area
1.	Karikot	Village Karikot Block Mehipurwa Bahraich	Goddess	Managed by Village Panchayat	5.0 acres
2.	Param Hans Kutti	Babaganj Nawabganj block Bahraich	Ram Janki	Managed by society	17.5 acres
3.	Mangali Nath	Awadhes Gaon Nawabganj Bahraich	Shiv	Managed by society	1.0 acre
4.	Mari Mata	Bahraich	Goddess	Managed by society	2.5 acres
5.	Jangali Nath	Basthanwa Bahraich	Shiv	Managed by society	5.0 acres
6.	Shivala Bag	Nanpara Bahraich	Shiv	Personal management by Chhaparia	10.0 acres
7.	Devi Patan	Tulsipur Balrampur	Goddess	Managed by Gorakh Nath Peeth	17.5 acres
8.	Sitadwar	Gilaula	Goddess	Managed by society	2.5 acres
9.	Kali Temples	Bhinga Shravasti	Goddess	Managed Personal (Raja Bhinga)	1.0 acre
10.	Akhand Param Dham	Sirsiya	Shiv	Managed Personal	1.0 acre
11.	Jhali Dham	Gonda (Khargupur)	Ram Janki	Managed by Sadguru Sadan Ashram Gonda	25.0 acres
12.	Prithavi Nath	Khargupur Gonda	Shiv	Managed by Distt. Authorities Gonda	12.5 acres
13.	Beriya Samaya	Khalilpur Bahraich	Goddess	Managed by Personal Raja Yadvendra Vikram Singh	25.0 acres

Ecological importance of sacred groves

1. **Biodiversity conservation:** The sacred groves are important repositories of floral and faunal diversity that have been conserved by local communities in a sustainable manner. They are often the last refuge of endemic species in the geographical region. They also act as repository for various Ayurvedic medicines. In modern times, sacred groves have become biodiversity hotspots, as various species seek refuge in the areas. Sacred groves often contain plant and

animal species that have become extinct in neighbouring areas. They, therefore, harbor great genetic diversity. Sacred groves in urban areas act as lungs to the city as well providing much needed vegetation cover.

2. **Recharges of aquifers:** The groves are often associated with ponds, streams of springs, which help meet the water requirements of the local people. The vegetative cover also helps in recharging the aquifers.



3. **Soil conservation:** The vegetation cover of the sacred groves improves the soil stability of the area and also prevents soil erosion.

Threats to the sacred groves

The threats vary from one region to the other and even from one grove to the other. But the common threats identified are:

1. Disappearance of traditional belief systems, which were fundamental to the concept of sacred groves. These systems and their rituals are now considered mere superstition.
2. Sacred groves in many parts of our country have been destroyed due to rapid urbanization and developmental interventions such as roads, railways tracks, dams including commercial forestry. Encroachment has led to the shrinkage of some of the largest groves in the country.
3. Many groves are suffering due to the transformation of the primitive forms of nature worship into formal temple worship.
4. Invasion by exotic weeds such as *Eupatorium odoratum*, *Xanthium strumarium*, *Lantana camera*, *Prosopis juliflora* and *Parthenium* spp. is a serious threat to some groves.
5. Pressures due to over grazing by increasing livestock and fuel wood collection.

Result and discussion

In the present study, it has been found that in

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traditional groves, most of the deity are Goddess and they are commonly known as Samay Sthan and Van Satti Devi. The area covered under these groves is potentially rich in genetic resources and they are well protected from illicit felling and poaching. In most of the groves even picking of dead and fallen twigs are not allowed. Most of the deities are represented by few bricks and stones only. At some places where Tharu tribes reside near by the forests, sculptures of animals like elephant are prepared with mud. During discussion with these tribes, it was noticed that they have great faith on their deity and look after the area where deity is present and they ensure that no one can disturb the place During the study, 31 traditional sacred groves were identified in the forest areas.

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