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Study on Sacred Grove: A Socio-Cultural Practice Among Tribals in Jhargram

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Abstract:
Sacred groves are community-conserved forest patches that embody the close relationship between indigenous cultural traditions, spirituality, and biodiversity conservation. This study explores the socio-cultural practices associated with sacred groves among the tribal communities of Jhargram district, West Bengal, with particular reference to the Chilkigarh Sacred Grove. A qualitative ethnographic research design was adopted, employing semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and documentary analysis. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the collected data.

The findings reveal that sacred groves play a significant role in preserving tribal cultural identity, traditional ecological knowledge, and biodiversity. The Chilkigarh Sacred Grove contains approximately 308 species of angiosperms belonging to 91 families, including 105 medicinal plant species, highlighting its ecological importance. Religious beliefs, customary laws, and cultural taboos have traditionally regulated the use of natural resources and ensured long-term conservation. However, the study also identifies several emerging threats, including modernization, changing socio-economic conditions, declining traditional beliefs, and the absence of adequate legal protection.

The study concludes that sacred groves represent an effective indigenous model of community-based conservation that integrates cultural values with environmental sustainability. Strengthening community participation, promoting environmental education, documenting indigenous knowledge, and developing supportive conservation policies are essential for safeguarding these culturally significant ecosystems. The findings contribute to the growing discourse on traditional ecological knowledge and provide practical insights for sustainable biodiversity conservation in tribal regions.

Keywords: *Sacred Groves; Tribal Communities; Indigenous Knowledge; Biodiversity Conservation; Ethnography; Jhargram; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; Sustainable Development.*

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1. Introduction

Sacred groves are community-protected forest patches conserved through indigenous religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and customary practices. These groves represent an important link between biodiversity conservation and tribal spirituality. Across India, sacred groves have traditionally functioned as natural sanctuaries where the extraction of forest resources is restricted due to religious taboos and the belief that deities and ancestral spirits reside within them (Gadgil & Vartak, 1976).

Jhargram district of West Bengal, inhabited by tribal communities such as the Santhal, Munda, Lodha, and Bhumij, possesses a rich tradition of sacred grove conservation. These groves serve as centres of worship, seasonal festivals, and community rituals while simultaneously preserving indigenous flora, medicinal plants, wildlife, and ecological balance. Tribal belief systems have contributed significantly to the protection of these ecosystems for generations.

Despite their ecological and cultural importance, sacred groves are increasingly threatened by deforestation, modernization, land-use change, and the gradual erosion of traditional beliefs among younger generations. Although local communities continue to protect many sacred groves, inadequate policy support and changing socio-economic conditions pose serious challenges to their long-term conservation.

Previous studies have highlighted the ecological, cultural, and biodiversity values of sacred groves (Kosambi, 1962; Gadgil &

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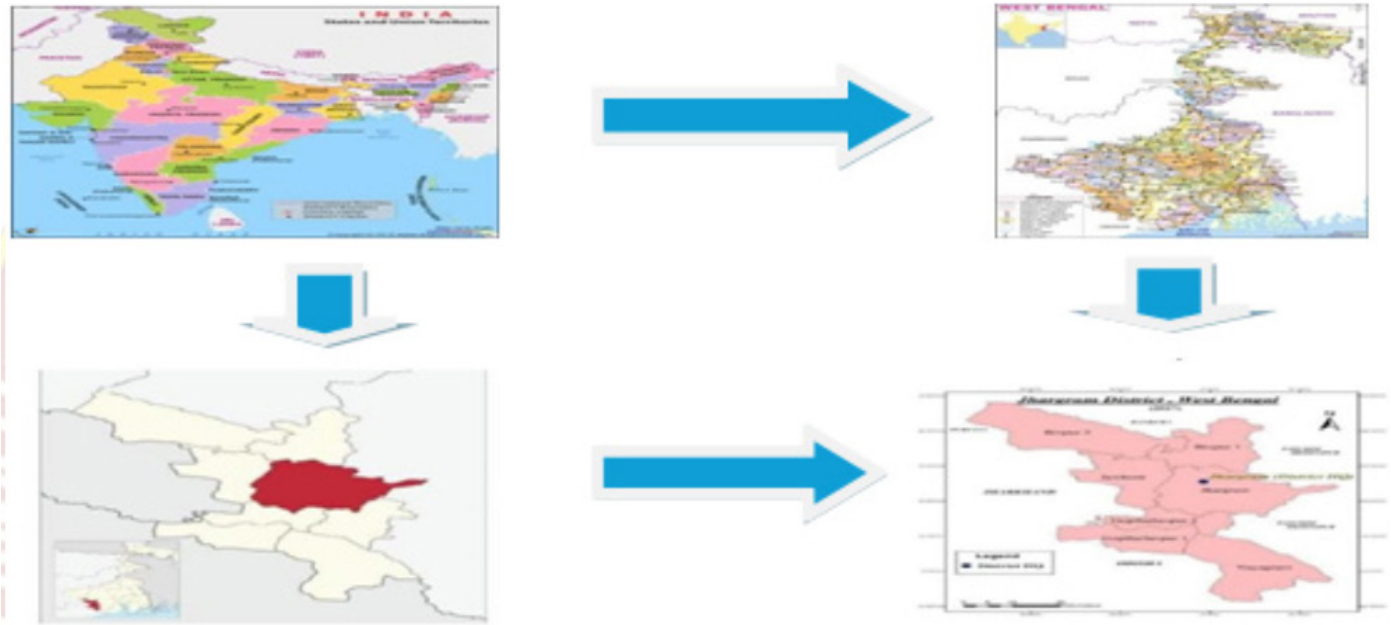
Vartak, 1975; Hughes & Chandran, 1998; Pandey & Patnaik, 1999). However, relatively little empirical research has focused on the socio-cultural practices associated with sacred groves among the tribal communities of Jhargram. Therefore, this study examines the cultural significance, ecological functions, conservation practices, and contemporary challenges of sacred groves in Jhargram.

2. Study Area:

The study was conducted in Jhargram Block of Jhargram district, West Bengal. Data were collected from selected sacred groves located in Jhargram East Circle and Jhargram West Circle, where tribal communities continue to maintain traditional sacred grove practices.



3. Definition of Sacred Grove:

Sacred groves are community-protected forest patches preserved through religious beliefs, customary laws, and traditional ecological knowledge. Scholars such as Roy (1928), Gadgil and Vartak (1976), Boojh and Ramakrishnan (1983), Hughes and Chandran (1998), and Pandey and Patnaik (1999) describe sacred groves as culturally protected ecosystems where human interference is restricted because these forests are believed to be the dwelling places of local deities and ancestral spirits. Besides their religious significance, sacred groves function as reservoirs of biodiversity and indigenous knowledge.

4. Rationale of the Study:

Sacred groves preserve both cultural heritage and biological diversity. However, increasing urbanization, changing lifestyles, and weakening traditional beliefs threaten their survival. There is limited documentation of the socio-cultural practices associated with sacred groves in Jhargram despite their ecological importance. This study seeks to document indigenous conservation practices, examine the relationship between tribal culture and biodiversity, and provide evidence for developing community-based conservation strategies.

5. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the socio-cultural significance of sacred groves among tribal communities.
2. To assess the ecological importance of sacred groves.
3. To document rituals and traditional conservation practices.
4. To identify contemporary threats to sacred groves.
5. To suggest strategies for sustainable conservation.

6. Research Questions

1. What socio-cultural roles do sacred groves play among tribal communities in Jhargram?
2. How do sacred groves contribute to biodiversity conservation?
3. What factors threaten the sustainability of sacred groves?
4. How do traditional beliefs and rituals support conservation?
5. What conservation strategies can strengthen both ecological protection and indigenous cultural heritage?

7. Delimitations

- The study is confined to selected sacred groves in Jhargram Block.

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- It focuses on Santhal, Munda, Lodha, and Bhumij communities.
- The study emphasizes socio-cultural and ecological aspects.
- Data are collected primarily through qualitative and ethnographic methods.

2. Literature Review

Sacred groves have long been recognized as community-conserved forest patches protected through indigenous religious beliefs, customary laws, and traditional ecological knowledge. They represent a unique interaction between culture and biodiversity conservation and have attracted considerable attention from researchers across anthropology, ecology, and environmental studies.

Early studies by Gadgil and Vartak (1975, 1976) demonstrated that sacred groves function as culturally protected ecosystems where religious beliefs and social taboos restrict resource extraction, thereby conserving biodiversity. Similarly, Roy (1928) and Sahay (1976) described sacred groves as sacred spaces associated with tribal rituals, ancestor worship, and seasonal festivals.

Several scholars have emphasized the ecological significance of sacred groves. Tiwari et al. (1998) identified them as reservoirs of endemic species and traditional medicinal plants, while Hughes and Chandran (1998) highlighted their role in biodiversity conservation and ecosystem stability. Bhagwat et al. (2005) further argued that sacred groves represent an effective model of community-based conservation that integrates indigenous knowledge with sustainable environmental management.

Research conducted in eastern India indicates that sacred groves contribute to soil conservation, groundwater recharge, carbon sequestration, and habitat protection for diverse flora and fauna (Deb et al., 2009). These ecological functions are particularly important in regions experiencing increasing environmental degradation.

From a socio-cultural perspective, Malhotra et al. (2001) and Singh and Sharma (2012) observed that sacred groves preserve tribal identity by supporting rituals, festivals, oral traditions, and indigenous knowledge systems. Among tribal communities such as the Santhal, Munda, Lodha, and Bhumij, sacred groves remain important centres of worship and community cohesion.

Despite their significance, several studies have reported growing threats to sacred groves. Chandran and Gadgil (1993) identified deforestation, agricultural expansion, and infrastructure development as major causes of degradation. More recent studies also indicate that modernization, migration, changing livelihoods, and declining traditional beliefs have weakened community participation in sacred grove conservation. In addition, the absence of formal legal recognition has increased their vulnerability.

Although previous studies have examined either the ecological or the cultural dimensions of sacred groves, relatively few have investigated these dimensions together in the context of Jhargram district. This indicates a significant research gap. The present study addresses this gap by examining the socio-cultural practices, ecological importance, conservation challenges, and community perspectives related to sacred groves among the tribal communities of Jhargram.

Research Gap

Existing literature demonstrates that sacred groves contribute significantly to biodiversity conservation and the preservation of indigenous culture. However, few empirical studies have focused specifically on Jhargram district, where sacred groves continue to play an important role in tribal religious life and environmental conservation. Moreover, limited research has adopted an integrated socio-cultural and ecological approach. Therefore, the present study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the relationship between tribal cultural practices and sacred grove conservation in Jhargram.

3. Methodology:

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative ethnographic research design to explore the socio-cultural practices and ecological significance of sacred groves among tribal communities in Jhargram, West Bengal. An ethnographic approach was considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of indigenous beliefs, rituals, traditional ecological knowledge, and community-based conservation practices through direct interaction and field observation.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in the Chilkigarh Sacred Grove surrounding the Kanak Durga Temple in Jhargram district, West Bengal. Located on the bank of the Dulung River (approximately 22°27′15″N, 86°52′54″E), the grove represents one of the important sacred forest patches of the region. Protected by local communities for centuries through religious beliefs and customary practices, the grove supports rich biodiversity and serves as a significant cultural and spiritual centre for the surrounding tribal population.

3.3 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through ethnographic fieldwork using multiple qualitative techniques:

- Semi-structured interviews with tribal elders, priests, women, and community members.
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to understand collective beliefs, rituals, conservation practices, and contemporary

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challenges.

- Participant observation during religious ceremonies, seasonal festivals, and community activities associated with the sacred grove.

Secondary data were collected from published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, biodiversity records, and relevant policy documents.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Information obtained from interviews, observations, and group discussions was coded into major themes such as religious beliefs, cultural practices, biodiversity conservation, indigenous knowledge, and threats to sacred groves. Findings from primary data were triangulated with secondary sources to improve the credibility of the study.

The adopted ethnographic methodology provided a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural and ecological dimensions of sacred groves in Jhargram. The combination of interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis enabled an in-depth exploration of indigenous conservation practices and the contemporary challenges affecting sacred grove sustainability.

4.1 Findings and Discussion

From the survey findings and report from the focus group discussion, it was noted that at Chilkigarh Sacred Grove, a total of 308 species of angiosperms covering 295 genera belonging to 91 families are present.Deciduous, semi-deciduous, and evergreen species present here in this grove. Different numbers of flora like climbers, woody climbers, parasites, epiphytes, ground orchids are present. Researcher after a detailed study noted that some rare cryptogams like ***Selaginella***, ***Ophioglossum***, and ***Helminthostachys*** are here present.In this Sacred Grove, 105 species of medicinal plants are present.In undivided Medinipur district, 288 types of medicinal plants were available.Only in sacred grove of Chilkigarh, Jhargram district, 36% of total medicinal plants of Medinipur district are present.Some currently vanishing medicinal plants like:***Tylophora asthmatica,Strychnos nux-vomica,Rauvolfia serpentina,Rauvolfia tetraphylla,Crataeva nurvala, Holarrhena antidysenterica,Gymnema sylvestre***.

Flowing common flora are also present in the sacred grove at Chilkigarh, Jhargram (201 page-202)

Sri.No	Scientific Name	Local Name	Habit
1	Annonua reticulata L.	Nona Ata	Tree
2	Aegle marmelos (L.) Correa	Bel	Tree
3	Albizia amara (Roxb.) B. Boivin	Sirish	Tree
4	Alstonia scholaris (L) R.Br.	Chatim	Tree
5	Artocarpus lacucha Buch.-Ham.	Madar	Tree
6	Bambusa bambos (L.) Voss	Kantabansh	Tree
7	Cascabela thevetia (L.) Lippold	Kolke	Tree
8	Cissus quadrngularis Chiov.	Harjora	Vine plant
9	Cleistanthus collinus (Roxb.) Benth. ex Hook.f.	Parashi	Tree
10	Commelina benghalensis L.	Kanshira	Herb
11	Crinum viviparum (Lam.) R.Ansari & V.J.Nair	Sukdarsan	Herb
12	Croton bonplandianus Baill.	Churchuri	Herb
13	Cyperus rotundus L.	Mutha	Herb
14	Desmodium gangeticum (L.) DC.	Salpani	Herb
15	Euphorbia nivulia Buch.-Ham.	Sijmonsa	Shrub
16	Ficus benghalensis L.	Bot	Tree
17	Ficus religiosa L.	Aswathha	Tree
18	Ficus rumphii Blume	Peepul	Tree
19	Gloriosa superba L.	Ulat-Chan-dal	Tender Climber
20	Holarrhena antidysentrica (L.) Wall. Ex A. DC.	Kurchi	Tree
21	Jatropha gossypiifolia L.	Lalbharen-da	Shrub
22	Mimosa pudica L.	Lajjabati	Herb
23	Mucuna pruriens (L.) DC.	Alkusi	Climber

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24	Pandanus odorifer (Forssk.) Kuntze	Keya	Tree
25	Pithecellobium dulce (Roxb.) Benth.	Jilapi	Tree
26	Pterocarpus marsupium Roxb.	Piyasal	Tree
27	Putranjiva roxburghii Wall.	Putrajiba	Tree
28	Shorea robusta Roth	Sal	Tree
29	Saraca asoca (Roxb.) Willd.	Ashok	Tree
30	Senna occidentalis (L.) Link	Kalkasunda	Shrub
31	Senna tora (L.) Roxb.	Chakunda	Herb
32	Tamarindus indica L.	Tentul	Tree
33	Vanda tessellata (Roxb.) Hook. ex G.Don	Rasna	Epiphyte

Tribal community were associated with the bio-physical environment in a network of spiritual connection (Taylor and Lennon, 2011). Throughout the world the tribal people believe that some specific plants are there to protect them. The same is applicable for the Hindu community also. Both the Hindus and the tribes worship plants like , Bel, Tulsi, Bot, Aswatha, Ashok etc. Tribes also believe that their god and goddess lives in the Sacred Groves (Singh et al., 2017). The sacred giant trees were believed by the tribes as their deity like Bot, Aswatha and Bel. On the Bodhi and Aswatha tree Vishnu deity and other goddesses lives so, worship and of Bot and Aswatha is taken as the replica of lord Vishnu. On the other hand tribes worship Bel tree as the replica of lord Shiva and Goddess Durga, and Kali. Therefore they never thought that worship of this deities can be done in there 'Jaher Than' as the sing Bonga and other deities live in this tree. In the same way the tribes do not pluck sal leared before sacrificing the sal flower in karam Than and Jaher Than.

Tribes used to do social and cultural programs near the sacred groves. Through these cultural programs tribes of Sacred Grove develop awareness among their future generations about importance.

Regarding the values of protecting and preserving , the plants and animals within The secrete Groves is enormous. According to Kent (2013) through conserving the nature Sacred Groves have proven to be a suitable method for thousands of years. Malhotra (1998) reported that perhaps one lakh to one lakh fifty thousand Sacred Groves may be present. In about sixty thousand villages, sacred groves are present and, they form a part of their daily life. So, socially and culturally sacred groves are integrated among the local tribal community. Bhagwat and Rutte (2006) reported that Sacred Groves are the potential factors for biodiversity management.

4.2 Discussion

Sacred grove in any area is a place of natural fauna and museum of protecting bio-diversity of flora and fauna. Though from a religious point of view, sacred Groves were protected by the local tribes, but either knowingly or unknowingly people are protecting the bio-diversity of flora and fauna in any sacred grove. It is also closely associated with the social and religious views of common people. The common people practice different customs and rituals near the sacred groves or Jaher than or Garum Than. Tribal people's marriage ceremony, Ma Morae and other festivals were held inside the sacred grove. So, social and cultural programming and tribal community and maintenance of bio-diversity in sacred groves are closely associated through sacred groves in situ reservation of flora and fauna occur here. In some areas, people have some myth about the presence of deities in the Sacred Grove, and therefore they protect the Sacred Grove from the very core of their heart.

If external people get admission in the Sacred Grove, the hidden resources will be destroyed and finally will be extinct. The Sacred Grove maintains in situ microclimate and microelement inside the grove. There is no need of any fertilizer or pesticide or fungicide in the sacred grove itself, can maintain ecosystem. Shortage of food, resources, shelter for the flora and fauna, if the deities have been lifted to the temple or any adjacent places, the Sacred Grove area will be irrelevant to the local people. Hence, the place will be instantly occupied by the people. The result will be complete extermination of different flora and fauna from the area which will destroy the sacred bio-diversity of nature.

4.3 Some common taboos believed associated with sacred grove.

- No body is permitted to enter in the Sacred Grove for any cause.
- Collection of living or dry plants or plants parts are not permitted.
- Cutting or uprooting of any plant is strictly prohibited.
- No body can be permitted to enter inside the Sacred Grove by wearing shoes.
- During menstrual period no woman are allowed to enter in the sacred grove.
- When devotees worship deities inside the Gacred Grove, they have to remain stoic eating onion, garlic, etc. And meet before one day.
- No body is permitted to make any disturbance in the Sacred Grove. If any body do it, he or she has to pay a fine to the local

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committee who are responsible to protect the sacred grove.

4.4 **Recommendations**

- A separate law is needed to protect the Sacred Grove.
- The forest department will be responsible for protecting the Sacred Grove.
- Educational institutions may be transferred to the local educational institution so that future generations can take responsibility.To protect the Sacred Groves,
- Mass awareness may be done in favour of the importance of protecting the Sacred Grove.
- Reforestation of the Gacred Grove must be initiated urgently.

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