

Research Article

Socio-Cultural Aspects of Sacred Grove: The Study in a Santal Village

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Abstract: ‘Sacred Grove’ is famous for nature worship and the concept of “sacred” implies where something maybe sacrificed in the name of religion. One the other hand, sacred grove is an animated component among the tribal society as well as the santal society. Sacred grove is locally known as *Jaherthan*, and the chief idol known as *Jaher Era* (the lady of the grove). However, the present paper study attempts to illustrate the social and cultural aspect of sacred grove among Santal tribal society. For the present work, author study in a Santal village, named Foringdanga under Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal. Therefore, present paper conveyed that the place ‘sacred grove’ among the santals society not only a religious place it’s also used for socio-cultural function because the sacred grove sometime used as the meeting place on various occasions such as social gatherings, marriage, after-death rituals and so on. Finally the study also stated that Subaltern Hindu deities like Manasa, Shitala and Dharma Thakur are worshipped on certain days, and those ceremonies are performed at the Garam-than, Manasa-than, Shitala-than but never performed into the sacred groves because all those goddesses have some specific images for which these rituals never performed into sacred groves.

Keywords: Sacred Grove, Nature Worship, Santals, Jaherthan, Tribal Society, Subaltern Hindu Deities.

INTRODUCTION

‘Sacred groves¹’ is possibly “as old as the civilization itself” in India (Skolimowski 1991). Although, several scholars have been noted that sacred groves are very ancient and widespread in the Old World cultures. Sacred groves the place where religious thinking, deities were imagined by the indigenous societies to exist through stones, trees, animals and woods and the animism² appears to the gratefulness and admiration of environment to provide the goods and services among the human society. The tribal sacred groves are considered as the absenteeism of any images of deities. However, the term ‘Sacred’ has been used by Emile Durkheim to mark as reference of the ‘*Sacred and the Profane*’ in his book entitled “*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*”, 1976. Though, Durkheim’s gave the explanation on religion where he expressed religion itself is a distinction between the sacred and the profane.

Moreover, “Sacred Groves are social spaces respected by the communities and they play multiple roles. The most significant of these is that of the symbol of self-assertion. Although, among many communities, the sacred groves are mandatorily kept to mark settlement rights” stated by leading Indian

anthropologist (Roy Burman, 2003). On the other hand, “In India, as well as in many parts of the world, number of communities practice different forms of nature worship. One such significant tradition is providing, where protection to patches of forests dedicated to deities and /or ancestral spirits. These patches of forests are known as sacred groves. The tradition is very ancient and was once very widespread in most parts of the world. Sacred Grove is rich heritage among the tribal communities which played significant role in religious and socio-cultural life among the local tribal people (Malhotra, *et al.*, 2001).

Sacred Grove study has been conducted worldwide and mainly studied by Botanists, Environmentalists, Ecologists and few Indian Anthropologists. Among them, it must be mention that Roy Burman and Malhotra, who carried out in depth studies on sacred grove. (Kosambi, 1962; Gadgil, 1976, and Vartak, 1981) state that sacred groves in Karnataka and Kerala are addresses of non-Sanskritic deities including snake gods. However, the concept ‘The Nature–Man–Spirit Complex’ promoted by an Anthropologist (L.P. Vidyarthi, 1963), where he stated that all culture may be divided into three parts such as Nature – Man – Spirit. Though, it was a theoretical and

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hypothetical idea to define the 'soul of the culture' of a hill tribe named the *Maler*.

Various cultural festivals are accomplished into the sacred grove for example most important social functions such as various occasions including social gatherings, marriage, after-death rituals and so on. However, in West Bengal, the sacred grove presents with the beliefs of animistic tribal deities and ancestral spirits. It is to be mentioned that in rural parts of Bengal sacred grove also known as *Jaherthan* (in Bengali) but the Santali people usually called *Jaher Era* (the lady of the grove). Among the Santal society sacred grove has the important function to establish village membership and geographical boundaries (Troisi, 1978). Detailed accounts of socio-cultural functions of the space of sacred groves have been pronounced in some ethnographic studies (Ray 1912; Troisi 1978; Baské 1993; Berkes 1999). In West Bengal, customary gatherings among different tribal communities take place into the *Jaher-than* (Santali nomenclature of sacred groves) on the occasion of *Salui* or *Sohrae* and *Karam* festivals, as well as wedding ceremonies (Deb and Malhotra 1997). However, the present study attempts to illustrate the social and cultural aspect of sacred grove among Santal tribal society. For the present work, author study in a Santal village, named *Foringdanga* under Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal.

During the study time researchers observed some features and concept about the Sacred Groves. Those features are given as below:

- Generally Sacred Groves are surrounded by trees and shrubs that are varied in nature. The Santal people or any people from other society never cut any branches of the trees which situated into sacred groves.
- Sacred Groves care of diverse types of flora which may have great medicinal value.
- Circle of the Sacred Groves rounded by deities, ancestors and spirits as they believed.
- Rituals are performed by the priests but the groves not having any priest to perform rituals, the santal people themselves do the needful.
- The Sacred Grove is twisted with their life and it assists to define their cultural identity.
- Sacred Groves are midpoints for propitious community activity such as festival of harvesting, weddings and birth rituals and so on because without the blessings of the presiding deity, no activity begins.

- Since the local santal people believe that their idols or deities to be present in the grove and displayed by the trees, shrubs and stones for which they want the sacred grove remain intact. These beliefs give the idea of bonding between the people and nature.

TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND SACRED GROVE

The Santals of the study area informed that Baha is their most important festival which also known as the spring festival and celebrated during the Sal blossom period. During this festival, they worship the major Bongas to ensure the safeguard of children as well as youth generation to promote prosperity. In worshipping day, everybody gathers at the *Jaherthan* (sacred grove) after taking their bath in the morning and the festival continued upto three days.

According to the Santal of *Foringdanga* village, they have the traditional customs of worshipping the *Thakur-Jiu*. In spite of they have the beliefs that *Jaher Era* and the *Gosae Era* protected them in the *Jaherthan*. The Santal people have the faith on a supreme deity called *Thakur Jiu*. *Thakur-Jiu* is the originator of the universe. But among the Santals have no specific worship on the *Thakur Jiu* thus, the santal people remembered the *Thakur Jiu* into the Sacred Groves on the occasion of marriage and death ceremonies.

On the other hand, the *Jaher Era* is the Lady of the Sacred Grove (locally known as *jaherthan*). The Santal people believed that *Jaher Era* is a spirit who take care of the other spirits at the *Jaherthan* and safe the villagers and never does any harm. However, according to the Santal people of *Foringdanga* village, *Jaher Era* exists in groves along with other divinities such as the *Moyeko-Turuiko* (literally means "five to six") but the *Jaher Era* controls over the sacred grove and other bonga in the *Jaherthan*.

Gosae Era another Spirit of the Sacred Grove. *Gosae Era* symbolized through *matkom* tree into the sacred grove. She is considered as a spirit and during worshipping village priest sacrificed a fowl into the *Jaherthan*.

Ancestral worship among the Santal tribe is very strong. All the Santal people from *Foringdanga* village have great respect to the spirit of the ancestors and before their ancestral worship, all the Santal people meet into the *Jaherthan* which also considered as social gathering.

SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPORTANCE OF SACRED GROVE

Socio-cultural meanings of sacred grove exist with the religious functions of the indigenous people or tribal people. Several festivals like *Salui*, *Karam*,

marriage rituals, after-death rituals as well as wedding ceremonies are performed into sacred groves. However, in depth accounts of socio-cultural functions of sacred grove has been illustrated by several ethnographic studies such as (Nath 1960), discussed that on the occasion of *Deepavali*, offerings of food and liquor are made in sacred groves among the Bhils tribes of Ratanmal; without any images of deities Hindu festivals like *Holi*, *Navratri*, *Devdiwali* have been performed into sacred groves in Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra stated (Godbole *et al.*, 1998) and the relationship of a tribal village with *jaherthan* exposed the unity of the group mentions (Troisi, 1978). One other hand two villages share the same *jaherthan* and which assists the essential principle to establish village bonding (Paranjapye, 1989); role of sacred groves in the process of socialization of the youth among the tribes of Chhotanagpur (Fernandes 1993); different tribal communities of Bihar celebrate their main rituals and festivals into the sacred groves reported by (Vidyarathi and Rai 1997; Deb and Malhotra 1997) stated that social gatherings take place in the sacred groves on the occasion of *Salui* and *Karam* festivals, as well as wedding ceremonies among the tribes of Southwest Bengal. Though, the same thing also observed among the santal society under studied village named *Foringdanga*. In *Foringdanga* village the santal people used their sacred grove for the purposes of social-cultural and religious gathering such as (i) worshipping of their traditional religious festival, (ii) socialization of the cultural festivals among the youth generation, (iii) wedding ceremonies for blessing of happiness and (v) also for community gathering purposes.

SANSKRITIZATION AND SACRED GROVE



Pic – 1 Sacred Grove of Santal village (adjacent view)

Dominance of the Brahminical social order created Sanskritization and became essential issues of traditional Indian society (Béteille 2005: 217). However, process of ‘Sanskritization’ among the indigenous societies is remaining and much of the ethnic spiritual societies transforming with this process. Thus, deities of Hindu godheads such as Shiva and Kali have been placed to the religion of ancient tribal communities. Therefore, this process of Sanskritization has been destroyed many ancient tribal sacred grove. Because, the tribal sacred groves encompass no images of deities and spirits but Sanskritisation habitually raises creation of images of a Hindu deity (Spadoni and Deb 2005). Though, in sanatl society of *Foringdanga* village have the images of *Shiva*, *Kali*, *Manasa*, *Shitala* and other Hindu deities which clearly explained that the study community has been passed through process of Sanskritization.

Therefore, Subaltern Hindu deities such as *Manasa*, *Shitala* and *Dharma Thakur* have been worshipping on certain especial days by the santal people of *Foringdanga* village and those ceremonies have been performed at the *Garam-than*, *Manasa-than*, *Shitala-than* but never performed into the sacred groves because all those goddesses have some specific images for which these rituals never performed into sacred groves. Although, sacred grove is not large in size under studied village but the sacred place protected different ethno-medicinal plants as well as also protect them with their religious beliefs and maybe it’s an explanation of dualism belief system among the santal community in the process of Sanskritization and the presence of their sacred grove.



Pic – 2 Sacred Grove of Santal villages (wider view)

CONCLUSION

Now-a-days, in India, the tribal people are still maintaining the sacred groves with the knowledge of nature. Though, all tribal community has its own socio-cultural and religious identity. In spite of the speedy pace of modernization and destruction of the customary faith the indigenous people of South-western part of West Bengal is still surrounded in the atmosphere of traditional beliefs and mythology. It must

be noted that the ethnic tribals like the Santals insist the roots of traditional beliefs and challenge of modernity.

The belief systems bounded by the sacred groves are unique semantic means of society to prevent intra-group clashes and the traditional beliefs. Along with these the sacred groves have another meaning which is common property resources.

Finally, the present study is containing the illustration of socio-cultural factors with the religious activities regarding the sacred grove in Santal village. The study provided the traditional beliefs protect the sacred groves and also provided the opposite view which is sacred grove also protect them from harmful spirits and gave the blessing of happiness.

Notes:

Sacred groves¹ – ‘Sacred’ means a God or Goddess and treated as holy which as an adjective. However, the ‘sacrate’, means ‘to consecrate’ in the Latin root whereas, the word ‘Grove’ defined as ‘a small tree’ or ‘a group of trees’.
animism² – ‘Animism’ means ‘breath, spirit, life’ in Latin word its anima. Edward Tylor developed animism as an anthropological theory in 1878.

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