

A B S T R A C T

The present study is basically an empirical research which attempts to understand the phenomenon of sacred groves not just as a physical entity but as a social space. Usually the sacred groves are small patches of forests which are dedicated to deities. Apparently the people do not fell or touch them for fear of the reigning deities of the groves. But the notion of supernatural is itself the creation of human beings. Very often they take shelter under the notion of the supernatural to fulfill the mundane needs of society. In other words the sacred groves have manifested features and latent functions- which basically fall under the realm of political economy. The main objective of the study was therefore to: **fathom the latent dimensions of the sacred groves by interpreting the perceptions of the people who preserve the sacred groves.** It was also attempted to decipher the functional utility of the groves and record the recent changes, which are taking place in them and provide explanations for these. Though this study is basically exploratory in nature attempt has been made to link it up with a particular theory of society.

The study has been carried out basically among two communities- the Mahadeo Kolis and Kunbis of Western Ghats in Maharashtra. The two communities have been chosen to seek a contrast between a fundamentally tribal community mainly surviving on a forest based economy and a non-tribal peasant community which is more exposed to the exploits of the market and the state. For studying the sacred groves among the Mahadeo Kolis the study concentrates on one village each from the Ambegaon and Junnar talukas of Pune district. Similarly one village

each was chosen in the Radhanagri and Sahuvasdi talukas of Kolhapur district in order to study the groves among the Kunbi people. Pune and Kolhapur districts were selected mainly because some botanical studies of the sacred groves were carried out in them earlier. Besides these some rapid surveys were carried out in the adjoining areas of the four selected villages. A few groves were also visited in the Raigad district adjoining Pune and Ratnagiri and Sindhurg district adjoining Kolhapur so as to trace the groves along the ancient trade routes leading to the coastal townships and ports.

The study has been carried out mainly based on a qualitative method. A series of cases have been recorded through intensive field investigations. In the four main villages my stay was for at least one week each at one go. I went back again to them once or twice for gaining clarity. The visits to other groves varied from one to three days each. The entire field investigation was completed in about eight months. The investigations in the field were carried out mainly through individual and group discussions. They were supplemented through direct observation and participant observations whenever possible. This apart a number of functionaries of government and non-governmental organisations were interviewed on this subject. Besides these an opinion survey was carried out by canvassing schedules among 25% of the households of each of the four main villages in the two districts.

The main finding of this study has been that the sacred groves represent an institution which is based on folk laws which run concurrently with the State laws. The groves are mainly located in peripheral zones where historically the roots of centralized authority have not been very strong or in areas where the political power base has

been in flux. The groves in these areas- where written history is lacking provide identity to the villagers in their settlements. They trace their antecedence to the villages through the spirits of their dead ancestors which are believed to dwell in the sacred groves. Many of the groves are located along the ancient trade routes through deep forests. These groves on the one hand provided shelter to the traders and also offered protection to them - more from the local people, since the offerings they made to the reigning deities of the groves were shared by the villagers. In the absence of centralized authorities this system ensured a free flow of commodities.

The historical function of the trade route groves are no longer there and no wonder that at many places they are being felled. Groves are also being felled as many of the Dalits have got converted to Buddhism and have given up the worship of the deities of their groves. Many of the groves are also being felled which were wrongly declared as individual property by promulgating the British laws during the colonial rule and after. Besides groves have also been felled at places where the state had misappropriated them. Many groves have also been felled due to the role of the disgruntled migrant elites working in cities like Bombay and Pune who collect money to construct big temples in their native villages.

The major finding of the present study is that sacred groves represent a multifaceted social institution. They cater to the needs of the political economy. They provide the moral basis for social formations in the peripheral and marginal zones. They are thus part of a system of organised anarchy as Weber would ascribe. The groves also do fulfill many other needs like aesthetic pleasures and religious desires. The environmental utility of the groves cannot be ruled out.

But such functions are basically incidental. The importance relating to biodiversity of the sacred groves too does not usually emanate from conscious efforts of the local people. The importance of such manifestations are more because of the outside influence of city dwellers and western designs who are bent on subverting the intellectual property rights. However, this dimension of political economy has not been sufficiently addressed to in the present study as this itself can be part of a major research.