CHAPTER 3

REIGNING DEITIES OF THE SACRED GROVES

Introduction:

According to Lissner (1961), humans have never been satisfied with merely the visible and the material. **Possessing a superabundance of spiritual momentum, humans propel themselves forward far beyond what Lissner calls the purely positive.** In contrast with animals, human beings have driven a wide cleft between them and nature. They have created an abyss that cannot be bridged, having thrown off the primeval bonds linking nature with the animal world. Thus, humans are alone and the lonelier they become, the more they seek to recover their lost paradise.

The energies of human beings, throughout history, were never directed solely to the necessities of life. Humans were always groping, questing their way further towards the unattainable. **This strange and inherent urge in human beings is their spirituality, which constantly leads them on towards a goal which is far beyond their reach. And that goal is the Supernatural.**

This superabundance in human beings, the striving to reach outside themselves and grasp the spiritual and transcendental (i.e. religion and the supernatural), has been the motive power behind some truly great achievements in history. These attempts to approach the eternal have provided the foundation of all art and culture. E.g. It was in the service of God and immortality that pyramids came into being, the Chinese built their pagodas and the Mayans reared their amazing temples to the skies.

Innumerable myths, countless thousands of legends and vast numbers of religious cults, all testify to the enormous energy which humans have devoted to the spiritual side of their lives.

People are not content to merely eat, sleep and warm themselves, but are moulded and permeated by spirituality. All the civilizations of mankind that have existed were rooted in religion and a quest for the supernatural. Without faith, religion and God, civilizations cannot be conceived.

**Applying Lissner’s view to sacred groves of Thane District, the researcher feels that it is this same spirituality that has enabled many of the groves to remain in their pristine condition from hunter gatherer times.**

Sacred Groves are the local people’s attempt to approach the Supernatural, to bridge the divide between human beings and nature. The deities that they are dedicated to are the mediators between human beings and nature.

**The Relationship between the Sacred Grove and the Supernatural is very close. It is also a very unique relationship.** This researcher, expecting the relationship to be one of fear and dread, was rather surprised to note the high level of affection the tribal people and local caste communities have for their deities in Thane District.
The communities covered over the 85 sacred groves were largely – Warli, Katkari, Thakur, Malhar Koli, Mahadeo Koli and Kokna (among tribal) and – Kunbi, Agri, Neo-Buddhist and Bhanushali (among rural caste communities).

A bird’s eye view indicates that the pantheon of the sacred groves in Thane District comprises of a number of deities. Some of these are fierce and the local people are careful in their worship. Others are benevolent, loving and giving and yet others are vigilant and protective.

The local people firmly believe that their deities must be constantly appeased in the correct manner; else some calamity will befall them. Each deity of this vast pantheon has its own characteristics and role. Some deities are carved on wood and others are rough carvings on stone. Yet others are simply stone lumps of varied shapes and sizes. All of these are smeared with red lead symbolizing blood offering.

### 3.1) CLASSIFICATION OF PANTHEON OF GODS IN SACRED GROVES OF THANNE DISTRICT:

Based on Primary Data from the field, this researcher was able to draw up a classification of the Pantheon of Gods worshipped by the tribal people and the local caste communities in the sacred groves of Thane District, into the following:

*Fig 3.1 – Classification of Gods in the sacred groves of Thane District*

The above classification has been explained with a description of the nature and role of the various deities of the Sacred Groves of Thane District.

### 3.2) NATURE AND ROLE OF DEITIES

In the Encyclopedia of the World’s Religions, there is an article by C. von Furer – Haimendorf titled – ‘Tribal Religions in Asia’. Here, he points out that throughout the greater part of history, man has led a nomadic life of a hunter and food gatherer. According to him, the earlier religious ideas must have developed among small bands of men and women roaming the world
in search of food. C. von Furer–Haimendorf is of the view that anthropological observation of tribes who are still hunters and food gatherers throws light upon practices which are compatible with the lifestyle of nomadic food gatherers. As per his view, it is likely that many of the religious ideas and practices were crystallized at a time when mankind’s total economy was based on hunting and food gathering.

3.2-a) GAONDEVI (THE VILLAGE GODDESS)

A visitor to an Indian village may be surprised to note that the temples of the great gods of the Hindu Pantheon viz. Shiva and Vishnu are not given as much importance as the little shrine of the local goddess viz. Gramdevi or Gaondevi. She has many names which will perhaps not be found in standard textbooks on Hinduism. But she is a ‘Mother of the Earth’ and directly responsible for the fertility of the fields and the surrounding villages. She may be linked mythologically with the consorts of the great gods (Parvati, Durga, Kali or Laxmi). But basically, she is for all practical purposes the guardian of the village and the one whom local people turn to in times of distress. She has her festivals and her responsibilities. It is possible that her function has not changed for over 5000 years.

This researcher found that Gaondevi is the reigning deity in many of the villages. Out of 85 Sacred Groves, 38 groves (44.71%) were dedicated to the Mother Goddess. She is a deity in her own right. Her shrine is found generally on the outskirts of the village or on the crossroads.

Kosambi (2008) has studied Mother Goddess Cults in great depth. In his book, ‘Myth and Reality’, he states that every village in Maharashtra has at least one mother goddess cult. According to him, the mother goddesses must have had a separate cult from the beginning, before the male god appeared on the scene. Such cults were prevalent in the non-Aryan element in India, and as Brahminism began to accept more and more of aboriginal practices, it became a standard practice. Kosambi feels that the food gatherers worshipped a goddess, while the male god appeared on the scene with pastoral living.

Table No. 3.1 indicates the number of male and female deities the sacred groves are dedicated to. In the number of male deities, it is important to note that the tiger god has been included.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grove dedicated to female deity</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>44.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grove dedicated to male deity</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>50.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Images

Gaondevi or Mother Goddesses are innumerable. They have no images in iconic form. They are represented by numerous shapeless stones daubed with minium or red lead. They are found
under trees, near rivers or rocks. None of them have a male consort or a ‘husband’. This, according to Kosambi, proves their antiquity.

**Names for the Goddess**

Often, the deity is called ‘Ai’ (The Mother) without any other name. Sometimes she is called ‘Amba – bai’ (Lady Mother, very close to the classical Ambemata) or ‘Ladu bai’ (The Dear Lady) or ‘Kalu bai’ (The Dark Lady).

Sometimes, according to Kosambi, there are fantastic local names for the goddesses, not to be found elsewhere at all. E.g. ‘Tukai’, ‘Jokai’, ‘Satiai’.

This researcher also came across such names across Thane District. E.g. Anahisheai (The Unseen Mother), Maandpa Devi (The Goddess on a Pedestal), Taakmai Devi (The Giving Goddess, like the classical ‘Annapurna’ viz. Goddess of Food).

![Fig. 3.2: The Gaondevi Mandir at Kaasna Village, Bhiwandi Taluka, Thane District (Extreme right – Gaondevi)](image)
Loving yet fierce…

As told to this researcher by the villagers, Gaondevi is a loving goddess, yet she can be very fierce if people disobey her. Taboos and Rules are very clearly laid down with respect to several areas – Menstruating Women, Cutting trees, keeping ‘navas” (fasting) for a particular purpose. The Goddess in many villages has to be placated with animal sacrifices. The goddess talks to the villagers through the people.

The ‘Saathi – Ashara’

Often, the mother goddesses become the ‘Saathi – Ashara’ (the Seven Apsaras or the Seven Sisters). In Thane District, this researcher came across a Village called Saatgaon in Shahpur Taluka, which was named after the Seven Sisters or Saathi – Ashara. The village goddess there was Anahishee Devi, who was one of the seven Apsaras and the other six were spread over various Talukas of Thane District. They were, Vajreshwari Devi, Renuka Devi, Ambika Devi, Mahalaxmi Devi, Kalika Devi and Dharae Devi. The local people, however, did not know the names of all the seven sisters of the Sahyadris. This researcher obtained all the names whilst interviewing the local priest at the famous Vajreshwari Devi Temple at Gunj Kathi Village, Wada Taluka, of Thane District. This researcher also came across a temple at Kinnavli Village, near Lake Kinnavli, of Sapat Shrungi Mata.
Open to the skies  In most of the villages across Thane District, the stone icon representing Gaondevi was open to the skies, with no permanent roofing. The roofs were generally makeshift, of bamboo, cane and hay. Asked why so, the villagers all across Thane stated that there is a legend about the type of temple and roof that the goddess wants. According to the legend, Mother Goddess has warned them that if they want to construct a temple with a roof for her, it has to be of wood. Moreover, the wood has to be of one tree only and the temple must be constructed overnight. If it is not completed in one day and one night, calamity will befall the village. People will suffer. There may be diseases, crop failure, deaths. So, the local villagers all
stated firmly that what the Mother Goddess wants is a ‘Hirva - Mukut’ (a green crown) and a thicket of trees as her home.

Fig. 3.6 - Parolgaon Village, Vasai Taluka, Thane District – Gaondevi temple is open to the skies.

Settlements around the Cult Spots

Kosambi (2008), stated that if a cult spot becomes well known, a settlement develops around the same. E.g. Tulja Bhavani at Tuljapur. This researcher came across the Santoshi Mata Grove at Ashagad Village in Dahanu Taluka of Thane District which was very well known drawing thousands of devotees on a daily basis. Ashagad is a well developed small township now.

This researcher also found a cult spot in Taakwal Village of Palghar Taluka, Thane District. The deity was Taakmai Devi and was inside a cave. The local people however, had constructed a temple around the cave. The iconic structure inside the cave had not been changed. The deity stands in rock formation above a cold water tank, which is a perennial water source inside the cave. The ‘pujari’ (priest) explained that during the ancient times (Epic Age approx.), Taakmai Devi would rise from the water when called by her devotees. She would bless them with clothing, jewellery and all that was necessary for a new bride to wear. In today’s day and age, she has stopped doing this. She may send the blessings through some person.

Goddess at the edge of the Village or the Crossroads: Mother Goddess shrines are found generally at the edge of the village (‘Vesh’ in Marathi). Local villagers are of the view that this is necessary because she keeps vigil and along with the Chheda who is her protector, she protects the village from harm or from evil forces. All village ceremonies begin from the edge of the village after taking the blessings of the goddess. Kosambi mentions ‘Goddess at the Crossroads’. This was noticed by the researcher especially in Dahanu Taluka of Thane District, where each crossroad was the entry into a new village. The crossroads had two large wooden poles in the centre about 5 – 6 feet away from each other. At the bottom of the pole was the mother goddess stone icon. Villagers stated that without the blessing of the mother goddess, no activity began. This area was also important if there was an epidemic. The villagers had to go
around the village with a pot taking away the epidemic into it and go to the crossroads and hand it over to the person from the next village who would follow the same procedure in his respective village. The pot was then destroyed at the last crossroad with a ceremony.

**R.E. Enthoven in his book, Folklore Notes (1912),** has mentioned that in villages where an epidemic prevails, the goddess would be installed at the crossroads where all the villagers would meet and worship her with ceremony for seven to eight days. Offerings of coconuts, lemons, cooked rice and curds are made and on the last day, animal sacrifices are also made. With the beating of drums and ceremony, the goddess is taken to the boundary of the village and kept there.

Goddesses at the crossroads are believed to be fierce deities. This view originates perhaps from the fact that the local people had no other form of protection in the remote interiors.

The people’s worship of and reverence for the divine mother is a very deep religious phenomenon. It reflects their need for security in a world that is uncertain and where the struggle for survival is a continuous one.
3.2 – b) ‘Rakshak’ (Protector) of the Mother Goddess (Chheda)

Mother Goddesses have a ‘Rakshak’ or a protector. This protector is called **Chheda or Chhedoba (Protective Father)**. The Chheda is represented in wooden or stone form, also daubed with red lead. **Chheda is a vigilante and not a consort.** He is a male deity and is believed to be very fierce. He is also the absorber of evil and all negative forces. 44% of the sacred groves dedicated to Gaondevi also had the Chheda, either next to the goddess or outside the temple area. Chheda has to be placated with animal sacrifice twice a year, during the ‘Saath’ months viz. In July (before the planting begins) and again in October (before the harvesting begins).

While Gaondevi is believed by the local villagers to be a loving deity, the Chheda is generally feared by all. **Several legends have been woven around the Chheda** who roams around the village at nights with his ‘ghunghurkathi’ (stout stick with bells). Those who have ‘seen’ him from either far or at close quarters, all say that he is very tall (over 8 feet), very dark with blazing eyes. People are advised not to touch Chheda icons even while worshipping and menstruating women do not come within the vicinity of the grove at all.

In Suponda Village, Wada Taluka of Thane District, local elders mentioned to the researcher that they had seen Gaondevi in her ‘Rath’ (Chariot), drawn by horses. The Chheda would walk in front of the chariot. When the villagers came closer to the chariot it would disappear.
R.E. Enthoven in his book, “Folklore Notes” (1912), has stated that the Chheda is a ghost of an unmarried Mahar male. This ghost as per folklore resides in mountains, in jungles and on the outskirts of the village. It attacks domestic animals. It haunts the fields and farms and moves around in public places. To avoid being troubled by it, the people offer the Chheda annual sacrifices of fowls or goats.

3.2 - c) THE TIGER GOD

(WAGHOBA, WAGHEYA, WAGHYA, WAGHDEV)

The Tiger God is another prominent deity in the pantheon of gods in the sacred groves of the tribal people and rural local caste communities in Thane District. The tiger is revered as The Protector of the Forests. There are several stories in Indian Mythology about tigers having tremendous powers. They are shown fighting dragons, creating rain, keeping children safe and having healing powers.

This researcher found 45% (38 nos.) of groves dedicated to the tiger god out of the 85 covered. Most prominent of these was the Warli Tribe and the Malhar Koli. They believe that the tiger is the greatest of gods. Every harvest season, they donate part of their harvest to the tiger god as a symbol of life and regeneration.

Korthud Village in Jawhar Taluka of Thane District is the birthplace of the Tiger god – Korthuba.

According to the legends, Korthuba was born to a virgin girl from Ozharpada in the same village. Since the miracle baby tiger cub was very naughty and harassed all the villagers, they begged him to go into the forest and take care of it. They promised to worship him and look after him. Since then, every tiger god icon faces a mountain or a forest. Korthud is the centre point for tiger god worship. Villagers from various Talukas travel over several days to come to Korthud before the harvest festival. No harvest begins without worship of the tiger god.

Dr. L. N. Chaphekar (1960), in his book on “The Thakurs of the Sahyadri”, has written on the tiger god festival celebrated by the tribal people. The 12th day of the dark fortnight of Ashwin is celebrated in honour of the tiger god. For 4 days before this, the young boys go from village to village dancing and singing. They fold rough blankets to form hooded cloaks over their heads. They decorate themselves with flowers and are armed with sticks and wooden swords. These dancers are called ‘Waghyas’ (tigers) and are given a handful of grain at each house they visit. They sing a two line chorus:

“Give ye! Give to the Waghyas!

Let the Waghya protect your cows!”
R.E. Enthoven in his book, “Folklore Notes” (1912), has also mentioned the Wagh Baras ceremony conducted for the protection of the cattle and the forests.

The collected grain is exchanged for rice and pulses and “dal – bhat” and “Khir” (milk and rice pudding) is cooked in the jungle. A ‘Naivedya’ (offering) is made to the tiger god before the food is eaten by the men and boys of the villages in the forest. Women do not attend this feast.

A fierce deity… The tiger is believed to be a very fierce deity. The local people who carried out tiger worship stated that they have to be careful in their worship or else the tiger would be angered. Since the tiger is the King of the jungle, everything in the forest… the trees, the animals
and all the water bodies there belong to him. As long as the tiger protects the forest, the local people believe they are safe. But if the forest is not protected, they will lose everything, since their livelihood depends a great deal on the forest.

During the Interviews, a large number of tribal and local caste communities made a statement which this researcher felt was necessary to analyze –

“For the tiger dies, we die……”

The above statement of the people brings out a few points of analysis.

i) The tribal people and local caste communities are aware that the tiger plays an important part in environment (forest) protection.

ii) If trees were cut down and the buffer zones destroyed, the tiger is threatened. As human beings encroach into their territory, the tigers face the danger of being the hunted.

iii) Other animals (primary and secondary consumers) whom the tiger hunts will proliferate and the trees, shrubs and grass (which are the primary producers of energy) face the danger of reducing greatly, as these animals feed on them. Consequently, man will not have enough food in the course of time. If the tiger is protected, the primary and secondary consumers and the producers are kept in balance. The buffer zones thus remain intact.
iv) It is not surprising thus, that the tribal people and the local caste communities are very much opposed to the use of these buffer zones for residential purposes.

v) Though it is only the tiger that is worshipped, other carnivorous animals like leopard and panthers are also called “Wagh” by the local people though they are not revered. The tribal and local caste communities believe that the tiger controls all the animals. Worship of the tiger will reduce the leopard and panther attacks and also keep the forest intact.

vi) There is a close relationship between the local people, the agricultural fields, the cattle and the tiger. a) The tiger eats cattle, poultry. He is the king of the jungle and as such the owner of the same. He can turn into a man – eater when older and can kill the people and their children. b) For six months of the year, the local farmers take up other jobs at construction sites etc. During this time they send their cattle into the jungle to graze and get them back in the evening. There is no one to mind the cattle during the day. c) the marginal farmer would be handicapped without his cattle and cannot sow the seeds for the rice grains without ploughing his field. Thus, they have to pray to the tiger to ‘protect’ their cattle and not eat them.

Dr. Robin Tribhuwan in his Film –“Rice Rituals of the Warlis”, has clearly brought out the fact that the entire life of the Warli revolves around rice. If his cattle were attacked by the tiger, he would be totally handicapped and would not be able to cultivate rice. Thus the survival of the farmer is at stake.

3.2 - d) – NATURE GODS

The realization of the cosmic order and the observation that ‘all flesh is grass’, may point out that whatever is responsible for the order of nature is not human or animal, but something superhuman and super animal – though this force may be given many human and animal characteristics. Nature Worship indicates belief in cosmic powers which man must try and appease and influence if he and his people must eat, live and procreate.

Two realms are clearly distinguished for nature worship – i) The Sky ii) The Earth. Deities of the sky are generally male viz. Sun, Moon, Rain, Planets. Deities of the earth are generally female viz. Earth Goddess, Goddess of Food, Corn Goddess, Goddess of Flowers. As agriculture and pastoralism established, the plants and crops on which people and animals depend upon for food become extremely important.

The annual Cycle of Nature is a dominating factor in people’s lives and is thus a focus of religious and magical attention. Sowing Time and Harvest Time are the two great occasions of the year. They are thus celebrated with festivals and rites intended to ensure a good crop.

Elements of Nature such as the Sun, the Moon, Rain, Wind, all affect the growth of crops. Successful agriculture demands a calendar which is worked out in keeping with events occurring
in the sky. Thus, events celebrating the union of the sun god with mother earth, of the rain god with the goddess of food… are all observed so that there would be a good harvest for the people and a pasturage for the animals.

Since ancient times, nature worship forms a very important part of tribal and rural culture all over India. This kind of worship continues till today. The Two Annual Festivals (Saath) in July and October, celebrated in the sacred groves are a clear indication of the local people’s attempts to placate the deities so that they should have a good harvest crop, good rain and good health and no calamities.

Customs and traditions of the tribal people revolve around nature. Since their major activity is farming, immense respect is shown towards nature and wildlife. Before the sowing season, worship of the Sun God (Suryadev), Rain God (Narandev, Paus Dev) and Mother Earth (Himayi Devi) takes place with offerings and prayers by each village together in community worship. Among the Warli tribals, the Goddess of the fields (Savari) is offered prayers. The harvest season is celebrated by glorifying the tiger god (Waghdev) and the Goddess of Grains (Kaansari Devi).

Tribhuwan and Tribhuwan (1999) in their book, ‘Tribal Dances of India’, have explained that the various songs and dances are symbolic of the nature gods that the people are trying to appease. E.g. The Warli Dance called ‘The Kambad Dance’ symbolizes the dance of the rain god ‘Naarandev’ to placate the goddess of food grains ‘Kansaari devi’, so that she should germinate and grow.

Worship of the Sun is relevant not only to the sacred groves of Thane District; it is practiced by many other great traditions. Sun Worship thus was one of the most ancient world religions. In Hinduism too, the sun god (Surya dev) is an ancient and revered deity. He is chief of the ‘Navagraha’ (the nine Classical planets) and is depicted as riding a chariot harnessed by seven horses which represent the seven colours of the rainbow or the seven days of the week. He presides over ‘Sun’ day.

The Sun as the Primordial Source of Energy, is deeply respected by the tribal and rural people of the sacred groves of Thane District. In all the sacred groves dedicated to Gaondevi or the Tiger god, the image of the sun is always carved on the top of the icon. The Annual ‘Saath’ festival begins with obeisance to the sun god. The union of the sun god with mother earth is celebrated and the people pray that this union will bring them good rain, good crops and good health.

R. E. Enthoven, in his book “Folklore Notes” (1912), has stated that sun worship forms a very important part of the upper caste and lower caste as well as tribal worship in India.
At this point, it is important to bring up L.P. Vidyarthi’s View on the Nature – Man – Spirit Complex. When mans technology is simple, his dependence on the spirit and nature is greater. Here, one can point out that the tribals look upon the Sun as the primordial source of all energy, which is a scientific view. They are aware that it is due to this energy that plants grow and their cattle can feed. If their cattle are healthy, their fields will also bear good crop and the people will be also healthy. Thus, Sun, Rain, Earth are all energy sources and must be worshipped by them.

This researcher came across several groves in Thane District dedicated to nature deities along with other deities.

Table No. 3.2 outlines the worship of nature gods in the sacred groves of Thane District.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deities</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature Deities (sun, rain, earth, wind, crops)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goddess of Disease</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>05.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord Shiva (reproduction)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiger God</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>44.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among the people living in and around the sacred groves of Thane, this researcher observed that the worship of the Sun God plays a very important role in the religion of the tribal and local caste communities. This researcher came across a separate grove dedicated solely to the sun god in Kasatvadi Village of Jawhar Taluka, Thane District. Similarly another sacred grove was dedicated to the sun god at Bathane Village, Vasai Taluka, of Thane District.

**WORSHIP OF NATURE GODS IS DIRECTLY LINKED WITH SURVIVAL**

The Nature Gods of the sacred groves of Thane District are thus revered and respected because they are directly linked with survival – Survival of the fields, the forests, the crops, the animals and the people themselves. Any disruption of the people’s relationship with these
deities has a direct impact on survival. Thus, preservation of biodiversity in the sacred groves of Thane district is linked with these deities and in essence with survival.

Worship of the nature gods – the sun, rain, moon, wind, earth all indicates a respect for the abiotic component which can be renewed in the ecosystem. They are absolutely necessary for the survival of human beings.

It also indicates that the value of the primary producers (i.e. plants and trees) is very much understood by the local people. Both, rural and tribal people, who are dependent on their fields and forests for survival, are aware that if there is any disruption in nature which affects the primary producers, their survival is at stake. Thus they have linked the nature gods with their food.

3.3) – ENERGY FLOW IN THE ECOSYSTEM VS.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF DEITIES IN THE SACRED GROVES OF THANE DISTRICT.

According to Savadi (2007), Energy can be defined as ‘The capacity to do work’. Energy Flows are routed through the Feeding Relationship in the Ecosystem. Energy flow through any ecosystem can be represented by a) The Food Chain and Food web b) The Biomass Pyramid.

The ultimate source of energy is the sun. The light energy gets converted into chemical energy by plants due to photosynthesis. Energy lost as heat is quite substantial and taken together from various trophic levels. There are 3 trophic levels viz. Autotrophs (the producers of food from raw material through photosynthesis i.e. the trees and plants), Heterotrophs (all the herbivorous, carnivorous and omnivorous consumers of energy, the detritivores (consumers of litter, debris and dung) the parasites and the scavengers, Saphrotrophs (the decomposers like bacteria and fungi).

The Food Chain and Food Web – The transfer of energy from plants through a series of other organisms comprises a Food Chain. These food chains can be short or they can be long. The shorter the food chain, the greater the biomass which can be produced from a given amount of energy. During the transfer of energy through the food chain, the level following the previous one always receives less energy. The flow of energy is unidirectional. Thus the energy lost as heat cannot be utilized.

Numbers of food chains comprise a Food Web. Organisms of one food chain depend on food from other food chains. Such an interdependent complex of food chains is called a food web. A
food web is a collection or matrix of food chains which shows the pattern of energy flow throughout a community.

**FOOD CHAINS**

**MAN**

CARNIVORE ———> QUARTERNARY CONSUMERS ———> CARNIVORE (eagle, tiger, lion)

CARNIVORE ———> TERTIARY CONSUMERS ———> CARNIVORE (snake, foxes)

CARNIVORE ———> SECONDARY CONSUMERS ———> CARNIVORE (rat, frog)

HERBIVORE ———> PRIMARY CONSUMERS ———> HERBIVORE (rabbits, grasshoppers etc)

PLANTS ———> PRIMARY PRODUCERS ———> PHYTOPLANKTON (Trees, grass, shrubs)

**TERRESTRIAL FOOD CHAIN**

**MARINE FOOD CHAIN**

**FOOD WEB**

**MAN**


Rabbits ———> Deer ———> Squirrels ———> seed eating birds

**PLANTS**

*Fig. 3.19 – The Food Chain and the Food Web*
BIOMASS PYRAMID: is explained as the trophic level of an organism's feeding status in the ecosystem.

Fig. 3.20 - The Biomass Pyramid

The above biomass pyramid indicates that energy is trapped and stored by plants. Transfer of energy takes place to the primary consumers who eat the plants. These are eaten by secondary consumers who in turn are eaten by tertiary consumers. Each of these stages is a trophic level.

Trophic levels in a particular system are represented by a pyramid. As we go higher up the pyramid, the energy rapidly reduces. Energy can never be recycled in an ecosystem, only raw materials are recycled.

Thus, by cutting trees, hunting animals, spraying pesticides, we put the food chain and energy levels in danger. The food chain provides the energy that all living things must have to survive and thus needs to be protected.

All the living organisms of the ecosystem depend on their food requirements on the green plants, directly or indirectly.
All the above explained can be related to the classification of deities in the Sacred Groves of Thane District. By worshipping the nature deities in the sacred groves, the local people link the energy flow in the ecosystem with their deities. All of this is linked with their survival. Worship of nature deities by the local people corresponds very closely with the Energy Flow and Nutrient cycling in their ecosystem.

This has been outlined through the diagrammatic explanation below
Worship of the Sun as the Primordial Source of energy along with other sky gods like the god of wind, rain, moon and planetary deities. Worship of Trees, plants as the primary producers on whom life depends. Worship of herbivorous animals who are used for agricultural work on the fields and on whom the people are dependent for their survival. These are the primary consumers. Worship of carnivorous animals like tiger and snake to placate them so that they should not eat their animals and the people. Worship of Earth and Water Deities i.e. the nutrient flow in the ecosystem, because of whom the people survive and worship of the goddess of disease so that the decomposers should not harm them.

The local people are not all educated. Despite this they have understood that they are on top of the biomass pyramid and in control of the producers and consumers, even though this control is rather limited. They are aware that they must utilize the energy resources with some respect and humility. This is because during the use of these resources, if they commit some mistakes, it may affect the entire nutrient cycle. Thus the worship of these forces, since the people realize that they are dependent on them for their survival.
3.4) – ANCESTRAL SPIRITS – (VEER CHEHRE)

Ancestors are regarded by most tribal and rural people as ‘The Guardians of the Clan’. The local people’s control over their environment is limited. They naturally want to establish good relations with their ancestors from whom they have inherited certain techniques and the understanding of whatever cosmic powers control the order of nature. These are the powers that provide food, clothing, shelter and children but they can also bring calamity and suffering. Thus they must be placated correctly.

Worship of Ancestral Spirits is an important aspect of both tribal and rural culture. The local people of Thane District believe that ancestors are a link with the supernatural and thus have to be given respect and worshipped in the same way as they would their gods and goddesses. Among the local tribal people and the caste communities, the deity “Veer” is a deified ancestor. Veer is the local Marathi term for ‘hero’. The ancestor is regarded by the local people as a hero… a very influential member of the clan. The local people are very grateful for the effort put in by the ancestors in procuring land, tending it and taking care of the family for so many years. Here, it is important to look at the Viewpoint of Colchester (1999), who says, ‘Indigenous people’s ancestral territories are not just their economic base, these lands are intimately bound up with their cosmologies and identities as communities and peoples. The landscape that they occupy is at once their home and the sacred abode of spiritual beings whose presence explains the functioning of the visible world. They see themselves as stewards holding the land of their ancestors in trust for future generations.’

This researcher came across several groves dedicated to ancestors. In some villages, the ancestral abode was called “Zaghe che Veer” or “Bandhe che Veer” (the heroes of the area/place). Three such areas were on agricultural ground and hence there were no groves around. Some were installed along with the main temple grove.

During the annual ‘Saath’ worship, the local people offer prayers to the ancestors who will take care of the family, the property and the children.

i) Saakhra Village: In Vikramgad Taluka of Thane District, outside the main Gaondevi temple but inside the grove, there are small figures etched on the rock surface. They resemble ‘Memorials’ or ‘Samadhi’ stones. They are dedicated to the previous owners of the agricultural land who have served the land and the family well, or who may have died an unnatural death. Villagers stated that their spirits were kept alongside Gaondevi so that they could be at peace. At least six such stones were noticed.
ii) **Shelavali Village:** In Shahpur Taluka of Thane District, near the steps of the Khandoba temple located on Mavilgad (about 1000 feet above sea level), there are ‘Samadhi’ stones under trees at intervals away from each other. These are smeared with red lead. They are ancestral spirit groves of those who were the watchkeepers of the temple and of Mavilgad Fort. They are called ‘Darodekar’. They were killed while protecting the fort and temple so they are the ‘Veer’, the brave vigilante who are worshipped today.

iii) **Deherze Village:** In Vikramgad Taluka of Thane District, in the main Gaondevi temple of the village, there is an ancestral spirit section, where this researcher counted about 85 stones daubed with red lead. The stones are not placed in any order. Thus, one had to tread very carefully, even if one was barefoot, for fear of stepping on a spirit stone icon. The caretaker priest stated that these were memorials of owners of agricultural land who are placed near Gaondevi to keep their souls at peace. Only each respective family recognizes the stones and conducts regular rituals individually.
iv) **Korthud Village**: In Jawhar Taluka of Thane District, the ancestral spirit grove was noticed on a raised area of about ½ guntha on agricultural land. The villagers called the memorial area “Bandhe che Veer”. As many as 65 flat rocks/stones were installed, each belonging to a particular family from Korthud Village, representing their respective ancestor. One family can place more than one stone if they wish. Images are carved on the stones and daubed with red lead and rice paste. Only the family members know their own stones. The area below is reserved for agriculture and there is no foliage left.

v) **Chaas Village**: In Mokhada Taluka of Thane District, these spirit icons are located outside the Hanuman Temple which the villagers stated was over 500 years old. There are seven stone icons which the villagers call “Veer Chehre”, who are the brave men of the village and whose spirits keep vigil till date. Next to these icons is the icon of the tiger god, Waghoba, who is the protector of the forests and the animals. During the Chaitra month (April), the mixed communities of Chaas Village pay their respects to Gaondevi, Waghoba and the Veer Chehre by conducting animal sacrifices.
vi) **Bathane Village:** In Vasai Taluka of Thane District, this researcher came across a very unusual grove dedicated to Cheroba, Suryadev and Waghoba. In this grove, on the floor of the shrine were several lumps of stone daubed with red lead and garlanded with flowers. Some stated that they were Bathane Chehre (ancestors of Bathane Village) and others were uncertain. There is also one stone icon with a flag post called ‘Khambesar’ under a tree. This is the ‘Vigilante Spirit’ of the village. Whatever animal is sacrificed, part of it is always offered to Khambesar also.

vii) **Kasatvadi Village:** In Jawhar Taluka of Thane District, outside the temple in the grove dedicated to the Tiger God, Waghoba, there are icons of Veer Chehre. The villagers stated that they were the influential people of the village who had passed away. They are revered as the vigilantes who will warn the gods of any approaching dangers.
viii) Durwaz Village: In Durwaz Village, Palghar Taluka of Thane District, this researcher came across a grove dedicated to Gaondevi and the tiger god, Waghoba and there were several stone icons daubed with red lead on the floor, all representing the ancestors of the family who owned the grove.

3.5) UNIQUE DEITIES

Some of the deities of the sacred groves of Thane District are unique to only the tribal people and the local caste communities. These deities have a close relationship with the local people, the forests, the animals and the fields. Such deities can be singled out for discussion because nowhere else were such deities noticed.
i) Cheroba (The Father of Many Faces) – This researcher came across three sacred groves dedicated to Cheroba. a) In Kaanve Village, Shahpur Taluka, Thane District. b) In Bathane Village and c) Hedavade Village of Vasai Taluka, Thane District. The Kunbi Maratha priest of Kaanve Village stated that Cheroba is a manifestation of Lord Vishnu of the Hindu Pantheon. According to him, Cheroba was “Panchamukhichera” (Five faces of God). However, he was able to name only three faces viz. Dukri Chehra (Pig Faced), Makri Chehra (Soldier Face) and Gavli Chehra (Priest Face). Even if one relates the three mentioned above to Hindu Mythology, one is still left guessing. For e.g. Dukri Chehra would be the Boar Incarnation of Lord Vishnu, Makri Chehra would be either the Rama or Parshuram incarnation and Gavli Chera would be the Buddha incarnation. In the other two villages, no one was able to give any names of Cheroba at all. However, informal interviews with priests have indicated that there are several ‘chehre’ that the people revere. They are not essentially nine as in Hindu Mythology, nor do they resemble the Hindu Pantheon. Thus, according to this researcher, Cheroba can be linked to all the different spirits the tribal and rural people revere, who have not been deified. All these bear a connection with their land and fields, forests and cattle. e.g. Dukri Chehra, i.e. Wild Boar is appeased so that it may not disturb the crops or harm the children. e.g. Makri Chehra, i.e. Soldier is revered so that the valiant spirit of a soldier may be inculcated among the people. e.g. Gavli Chehra i.e. Priest is appeased with coconut offerings so that it may guide the present priests to protect the people of the village. There were several other faces (Chehra) named e.g. Menda Shivari Chehra (the Shepherd God), Torani Chehra (Crop protector), Chaarandev Chehra (The spirit who finds lost cattle), Mayiri Chehra (Loving Ancestors).

Fig. 3.31-Cheroba–Bathane Village, Vasai Taluka  
Fig. 3.32 Cheroba–Kaanve Village, Shahpur Taluka
ii) **Ghodabagh Dev (The Horse – Tiger God):** Only one such deity was found among all the 85 groves covered over Thane District. In Charoti Village, Dahanu Taluka of Thane, this grove was dedicated to ‘Ghodabagh Dev’ (the horse – tiger god), by Koli Malhar tribal people. By way of appearance, the deity had a human face (demonic) and arms, but the front portion of the body was like a horse and the back part was like a tiger. The deity had bright eyes and a horn – like crown on the head. Villagers stated that it was a fierce deity, but it was appeased only with coconut offerings. **According to this researcher,** worship of the horse would probably stem from the fact that horses were used to reach destinations, to climb mountains and for hunting and warfare. Worship of the tiger stems from the fact that the tribal people fear for this animal that can destroy their livestock and render them helpless with respect to ploughing their fields, pulling bullock carts etc.

![Ghodabagh Dev](image)

**Fig. 3.33 - Ghodabagh Dev (Horse Tiger God) in Charoti Village, Dahanu Taluka of Thane District, was one of the most unique deities across the whole of tribal and rural Thane. In no other grove was such a deity found by this researcher.**

iii) **Barkat Dev (The God of Prosperity):** In Theronda Village of Dahanu Taluka, Thane District, a large banyan tree grove (Ficus bengalensis), was dedicated to this deity. Villagers were all Koli Malhar. This researcher was informed that Barkat Dev was the male god of food grains (similar to Goddess Annapurna of Hinduism and Kansaari devi of the Warlis). As related by the priest, Barkat Dev appeared on the scene when people were eating only meat and wasting food grains. The villagers were assured by the god that they would be cared for if they never wasted food grains or else they would be doomed. The Koli Malhar tribe gives a lot of importance to the rice crop. The priest stated that today, due to the influence of Barkat Dev, people take care of their crops and food grains are treated with the
utmost respect. As the priest stated – “If grain is well utilized and the crop is well attended by the village people, Barkat Dev will understand our need and grant prosperity to all the people in the whole village.

Fig. 3.34 - Barkat Dev – The God of Prosperity in Theronda Village, Dahanu Taluka, Thane

**Cosmic Beings/Deities – Legends and Myths**

The lives of the tribal and rural people of Thane District are centered around two realms viz. The Fields and the Forest. Their entire lifestyle revolves around these two realms. Worship of deities in the sacred groves is mainly to ensure that there is enough food to eat and water for various uses and so that their forests remain green and their fields have good crops. Myths and legends have evolved which ensure that the people follow all the rules and taboos that have been laid down by their ancestors for reasons that ensure survival.

**Warli Legend of ‘Kansaari Devi’ – The Goddess of Food grains**

i) “Wasting food grains leads to famine….”

Tribhuwan and Tribhuwan (1999), in their book, ‘Tribal Dances of India’ have explained the legend of the Goddess of Food Grains (Kansaari Devi) and The Rain God (Naarandev or Paus Dev). As the legend goes, Kansaari Devi was unhappy with the human race because they showed no value for food grains. So she hid herself in a cleft of a rock away from sight. Since she disappeared, there was famine everywhere. Both Gods and humans went looking for her but were unable to find her. Finally, the Rain God, Naarandev promised the gods that he would look for her. He found her hiding in the cleft of a rock, fast asleep. He then performed a dance to appease her so that she would awaken, return to the earth and germinate. This dance is called the Kambad Dance. This dance is performed during the sowing season. Only males perform the dance and it is symbolic of Naarandev’s dance to appease Kansaari Devi.

A naked seed without water is futile. She germinates only when in contact with the earth and water.
ii) During the harvest season, the Warli’s perform the Taarpa Dance. This is to celebrate fertility and the coming of food grains into the home. Both males and females take part in this dance and they face the Taarpa throughout the dance as they move in circles around it. The Warlis believe that the Taarpa is a divine instrument and has been gifted to them by Naarandev the rain god.

iii) “Cutting trees causes them to bleed…”

This researcher was informed about this myth in the pristine sacred grove of Shedoba at Umbroli – Kurdh Village of Murbad Taluka, Thane District. All the Kalamb trees (*Mitragyna parvifolia*), are believed to be Shedoba’s trees and hence sacred. There is a very strong taboo against tree cutting of any kind due to the belief that the Kalamb trees bleed when cut. As a result, none of the trees are touched by the people. The priest, a Kunbi Maratha by caste, narrated a story about a man from the same village who cut the Kalamb tree and fell violently ill after doing so. Then he began ‘menstruating’ blood and this continued for a couple of months till the man pleaded forgiveness of Shedoba and offered dry coconut and incense sticks. The bleeding stopped only after this repentant action of the man.

iv) “People vomit blood if they cut the banyan tree that belongs to ‘Barkat dev’…”

In the Sacred Grove of Barkat dev at Theronda Village of Dahana Taluka, Thane District, the God of Food grains is worshipped. The entire grove is one large banyan tree (*Ficus bengalensis*) that has extended so far right on to their rice fields. No one is allowed to take off even a branch of the tree. Those who cut branches have vomited blood.

As related by the priest, who is a Koli Malhar, Barkat dev appeared on the scene when people had no value for food grains and were more interested in eating meat. Barkat dev sat under the banyan tree where there is a small shrine dedicated to him. When Barkat dev refused to move, there was famine everywhere. People did not get food grains and they began to fear. They approached Barkat dev and begged forgiveness. They promised to respect food grains and Barkat Dev forgave them as he is a benevolent god.
3.6) Analysis - “The Interrelated Triad”

Applying L.P. Vidyarthi’s Model to the Sacred Groves of Thane District, this researcher feels that Worship of the vast pantheon of deities by the local people across sacred groves indicates a Deep Triism of Interdependence and Interrelationship between a) The Sacred Grove b) The Deities and c) The Local People.

Religious Beliefs and Myths thus play a very crucial role in environment conservation. In a traditional society like that of the tribal and rural communities, divine legitimating is necessary in order to control people’s actions. Animistic/Totemic religion also provides a background for the observation of such rules. Fear of deities, whether the deity is the village goddess, the tiger god, the chhedha or the ancestors, is an effective means of social control. Thus, traditional religion aims at preservation of the entire ecosystem.

Priests both tribal and rural who have laid down strong rules that connect the deities to environment conservation also play an important role. A deep respect for priests among rural and tribal communities prompts them to follow conservation norms without questioning and these become part of their lifestyle. Thus, if the priests have said that the trees bleed if cut, then no one touches the trees. If the priests have stated that those who cut trees will vomit blood, no one will touch the trees. If the priests have stated that the tiger will not harm the people, but will protect the jungle, then the people believe that this is so.
The Sacred Grove is the centre point of religious activity in the village. Two important festivals are celebrated here – both having a deep connection with agriculture. The first (Saath) is before the sowing and planting begins in July and the second (Saath) is when the harvest is reaped in October. The entire village gathers here and pays respects to the deities before beginning any work on the fields.

Two Spheres viz. Fields and Forests exist in a mutually complementary and beneficial manner. Traditional systems and beliefs which are found among the communities in and around the sacred groves have a significant bearing on the conservation of the groves and the forests and thus help in protecting biodiversity. Such traditional religious practices help to preserve forests. As long as they still hold sway in many aspects of life, they will influence sacred grove and forest preservation. However, if fear of deities and spirits weaken, which is what is happening today, then some other ideological support is required as an apt substitute to Animism. This should be an ideology that helps the tribal and rural people to strengthen their traditional forms of forest management and conservation.

At this point, the view of Dr. J.J. Roy Burman in his book “Sacred Groves among Communities” (2003), is important. He points out by logically explaining that the sacred groves of the Western Ghats by themselves as separate entities, do not contribute to conservation of the environment. It is because the local people feel the need to preserve them as part of their ancestral tradition, that they remain so. Also, he states that “such groves symbolically bring human societies closer to nature”. According to him, they are revered because of their association with the supernatural forces and deities like Gaondevi, Waghoba, and Chhed, whose overwhelming presence in the groves is very strong. Thus, “The Sacred Groves ensure cosmic ties of human beings with nature and breed a prudent use of it”.

The researcher noted that the local people in and around the sacred groves had a very close and deep relationship with the grove, with the deities and with one another. This is a relationship that is not limited only to festivals and ceremonies, but has a direct link with survival. In a world of uncertainty, the link with the cosmic deities gives the local people security. They feel protected and healed and in turn, they also protect the groves.

A myriad of relationships emanate from the interactions in and around the sacred groves. Through these relationships of sharing, a culture pattern becomes visible. This is a pattern that
morphs via a movement towards the protection and preservation of the sacred groves and thus of biodiversity.

**Discussion:**

Culture is historically developed, learned and shared behaviour, which is socially transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth, through the processes of enculturation and socialization. It is argued by the researcher in this chapter that the so-called regional elites belonging to both tribal and caste communities worked together for a common cause viz. preserving biodiversity.

Hence, sacred groves were interpreted in terms of man’s relationship with these patches of forestlands by intertwining the cosmic beings, ancestral spirits, village deities, gods and goddesses associated with health and well being (Hathoba), deities associated with survival (Kansaari devi, the goddess of food grains, Barkat dev, the god of prosperity), deities associated with ferocious wild animals such as Waghoba (the tiger god) and Nagoba (the snake god), deities associated with free moving spirits and energies such as Annahishidevi and Maandpadevi.

However, today, there are new forces/lifestyles which pose as threats to sacred groves. While earlier people themselves ruled the forests, there was no room for corruption. Now, as there is no separate department to handle sacred groves, the administration often turns a blind eye to the greed and demands of the consumers of forest produce and to the threats posed to the sacred groves and the forests also.

Forest laws are impacting the livelihood of the local people who are dependent on minor forest produce like honey, lac, karvy sticks, bamboo etc. If forest laws are meant to prevent local people from using forest resources, then what is the substitute that is being offered to them?

Obeisance to the deities is still very strong but it may weaken. Some other ideological support is then required as an apt substitute to animistic beliefs that have helped to preserve and protect groves till date.

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