

Spiritual and Religious Significance in Biodiversity Conservation

Dr. Ashok Ku. Sahani*

Scientist- E, G B Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment, GRC, Srinagar Garhwal, Uttarakhand

Email: aks.gbpihed@rediffmail.com

Abstract - Human beings have an intense relationship with nature from the origin of the human species, which was more utilitarian until organized religion. Animism was the primitive form of religion believed in having spirit in every living being and objects; thus, creating a human-nature inter relationship. Early humans were aware of the importance of natural things, such as earth, fire, water, air, and light, to continue and survive human life and they worship those elements as God is called "Panchhataav". Religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Confucianism, and Shinto are repeatedly reminding us about the interdependence between humans and nature. The philosophical systems of these religions explicitly prescribe the conservation of wildlife for human survival. Even the archaeological evidence from Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa suggests worshiped many animals and India during proto-historic times (Dwivedi et al, 1987). Even in present days, some communities', especially the tribal (indigenous people) and other forest-dependent communities practices are evident in conserving biodiversity. In rural India some indigenous communities consider some specific plants/trees, animals, or even rivers and mountains as their ancestors and protect them as God or Goddess. Historically, the tribal communities have been harmoniously co-existing with their surrounding environment by following their traditional beliefs, practices, experiences, and indigenous knowledge. Their in-depth ecological knowledge has made them adopt a particular environmental condition through sustainable conservation practices of flora and fauna. Spirituality means awareness, a deep sense of liveliness, the importance of awareness, understanding, and recognition that we are living for a specific purpose and connecting our physical life and our physical world with something greater than knowledge. Rural peoples consider all living being have a soul, and thus they must respect all living organisms. They give equal values and respect to living and non-living beings like mountains, earth etc. So, biodiversity is the variation of life on earth that lives in different ecosystems/habitats and is interconnected.

Keywords - Spiritual, biodiversity, natural resources, community, indigenous, sacred grove, pilgrimage.

-----X-----

Spirituality reminded people that existence is connected with all these living and non-living beings and must respect and preserve it for their presence and the earth's survival. In spirituality, we are not limited to the planet, but we connect with the universe and try to find the answer for our existence, our life purpose, and how to serve our mother earth.

Spirituality makes people kind, humble, and more responsible, begins to think about nature and begins to believe in reality. Thus, spiritualism inspire the human beings for positive thinking, which spirit worships individual trees it will encourage to protect forests.

In India, there are many groups of tribes and communities who believe in naturalism. They worship all the natural resources surrounding like animals, mountains, rivers, groves, herbal plants, and trees. They treat all of them as God, and they only believe in living a simple life with the help of nature, not over-utilizing nature for economic wealth. There are so many sacred groves in India, considered as religious and

spiritual important which leads to biodiversity conservation.

List of Sacred Groves in India

State	Local term for Sacred Groves	Number of Sacred Groves
Andhra Pradesh	Pavithravana	580
Arunachal Pradesh	Gumpa Forests (Attached to Buddhist monasteries)	101
Goa	Deorai, Pann	55
Jharkhand	Sarana	29
Karnataka	Devara Kadu	1531
Kerala	Kavu, Sara Kavu	299
Maharashtra	Devrai, Devrahi, Devgudi	2820
Manipur	Gamkhap, Mauhak (Sacred bamboo Reserve)	166
Meghalaya	Ki Law Lyngdoh, Ki Law Kyntang, Ki Law Niam	101
Orissa	Jahera, Thukuramma	169
Puducherry	Kovil Kadu	108
Rajasthan	Orans, Kenkris, Jogmaya	560
Tamil Nadu	Swwami shoal, Koikadu	752
Uttarakhand	Dev Van, Bugyal (Sacred Alpine Meadows)	28
West Bengal	Garamthan, Harihan, Jahera, Sabitrithan, Santalburithan	39

Sr. No.	Sacred Groves	Deity	Place
1	Tarkeshwar, Kiunkaleshwar	Lord Shiva	Pauri Garhwal
2	Binsar	Lord Shiva	Pauri Garhwal
3	Kot	Lord Shiva	Pauri Garhwal
4	Nandisain	Local Deity	Pauri Garhwal
5	Paabo	Lord Shiva	Pauri Garhwal
6	Chapdon, Mundeshwar, Neelkanth	Lord Shiva	Pauri Garhwal
7	Chandrabadni	Goddess Durga	Tehri Garhwal
8	Surkanda	Goddess Durga	Tehri Garhwal
9	Sem Mukhem	Lord Vishnu	Tehri Garhwal
10	Tapkeshwar	Lord Shiva	Dehradun
11	Sahsradhara, Devban	Local Deity	Dehradun
12	Lakhamandal	Pandavs	Dehradun
13	Santala Devi	Santala Devi	Dehradun
14	Ghenteyal ki cheevi,	Local Deity	Badeth, Chamoli
15	Ghandiyal devta ka van	Local Deity	Majyanitali, Chamoli
16	Nanda aur Ghanakran ki phulwari	Goddess Durga	Mana, Chamoli
17	Fullana	Local Deity	Thaing, Chamoli
18	Bhagwati ka jungle	Local Deity	Irani, Chamoli
19	Dronagiri	Lord Hanuman	Dronagiri, Chamoli
20	Saula Forest	Local Deity	Knumera, Chamoli
21	Hariyali Devi	Goddess Durga	Chamoli
22	Tungnath	Lord Shiva	Ukhimath
23	Kalimath	Goddess Durga	Chamoli
24	Thal ke Dhar	Local Deity	Pithoragarh
25	Syahi Devi	Goddess Durga	Almora
26	Chital, Gairar	Local Deity	Almora
27	Golu Devta, Bineshwar Mahadev	Lord Shiva	Almora
28	Kasardevi	Local Deity	Almora

Source: Anthwal et al. (2006) and Bisht and Ghildiyal (2007).

(Source - <http://ecoheritage.cpreec.org/innerpageof.php?%mFJyBfKPkE6>)

Uttarakhand is known as Dev-Bhumi, which means land of God. There are many religious and cultural activities which conserve directly or indirectly the nature and its biodiversity. Some indigenous communities and tribal communities like Bhotiya, Tharu, Buksa, Janasuri, and Raji are doing these practices. There are many sacred groves associated with religion and believe in conserving the biodiversity. Sacred groves like Chipola Kedar, Tarkeshwar, Hariyali Devi, Binsar, Kot, Kalimath, Golden, Tapovan, Chandrabadani, Tungnath, and Triyuginarayan are some of the essential sacred groves of Dev Bhumi.

Many generations have preserved throughout sacred groves represent local vegetation in natural habitats. They thus are rich in biodiversity and harbour many rare species of plants and animals. They believe that trees are abode of Gods with ancestral spirits, many communities consider forest areas and formulate customs to ensure their protection. These rules differ from one grove to another but are often prohibited for cutting of trees, prohibiting of collecting any material from the forest and animal's products even lying in the floor of forest land. Presiding deities administered punishment, usually death, sickness to family or person who violated these rules, and sometimes to the entire community in the form of disease or any natural disasters. Because of these restrictions, sacred groves have been preserved for countless years and sacred groves have become essential reservoirs for biodiversity conservation. In many sacred groves, people practice some annual rituals and ceremonies to please the presiding deity for the well-being of the community and their cattle. It is very common in peasant societies to make personal offerings in exchange for wishes and blessings for good health, harvest, and a child's birth and many social obligations. Some Sacred groves in Uttarakhand are given below:

List of Sacred Groves in Uttarakhand

A sacred site is an area that is regarded with reverence. The sanctity is not restricted to temple towns alone. The Badrinath temple in the lap of the Garwal Himalayas, signifying in the northern parts of India's sacred region. The word Gomukh, means cow's mouth, is situated on the Bhagirathi glacier and the origin of river Ganga. Seven holy cities in India are located where the river Ganga is going through in the north plains. In every 12 years religious festival called the *Kumbhmela* attracts millions of pilgrims for a sacrificial bath. All these sacred sites are protected, and nature is worshipped as spiritual points for getting salvation.

Uttarakhand is very rich in water resources. There are many originated sites of the rivers such as Mandakini originated from Kedarnath, Bhagirathi from Gangotri, the Yamuna from Yamunotri, Dholi Ganga, Nandakini, Alaknanda from Badrinath, and Pindar Ganga are origin from Pinder Ganga which are considered as sacred places. Some confusion points as *sangams* like Vishnu Prayag, Nand Prayag, Karan Prayag, Rudra Prayag, and Dev Prayag are sacred places and people are protecting the water flows as strong believe in deity. In the *sangams* there are many rituals ceremonies taking place like worship, *pind dan*, holy bath, arti, and immersion of deities which directly protect our river system.

All religions believe in nature and its conservation. Particularly some animal and plant species as religious symbols, and thus these species have got significant protection by the communities. Some species which do not have represent any religious symbol are in danger and may fall into the threatened categories. Religion can help to conserve endangered species by adopting it as its religious symbol. Such as :

- Tiger/Lion is conserved by protecting reserved forest which is important as religiously for the mount (*Vahan*) of Goddess Durga.

- The Cow is also a sacred animal for the Hindu it is considered as Maa and associate with Lord Krishna. Lord Shiva also Mount (*Nandi*) the bull which are sacred animals and protected.
- The snake Cobra is most commonly associated with Lord Shiva, which always found in the neck lord Shiva. It symbolizes the power the Lord has over the deadliest of creatures.
- The Cobra is also sacred to the Buddhists, who believe that a cobra (which the serpent King Muchalinda) protected Lord Buddha from a raging storm by spreading its hood while he was meditating.
- Naga Panchami is an important Hindu festival associated with snake worship which is celebrated on fifth day in the month of *Shravana*. In 'Pandav Nartiya', which is performed in Diwali or Dussera festival, perform the dance with an artificial snake and give message to society for its protection.
- Wild boar is equally sacred in Hindu religion as third incarnation of Lord Vishnu *Varaha avatar* is generally depicted as having a boar's head with human body.
- Pig is considered *haraam* by Muslims and consumption of pig meat (pork) is forbidden.
- Mongoose is the ride of Kubera, who is considered as the God of wealth and the guardian deity of the northern direction in Hindu / Buddhist mythology.
- The peacock our national bird is sacred to the Buddhists as well as Hindu. In Vajrayana Buddhism, the Mahamayurin or the 'Peacock wisdom Queen' is depicted riding a peacock. The peacock is ride of Goddess Saraswati and often shown with a peacock. Whenever Lord Indra change his original looks into an animal, he is transformed to a peacock.
- The deer is associated with numerous stories in Indian mythology. In the epic Ramayana, *Mareechha* assumed in the looks of a golden deer to draw the attention of Sita. Hunting of deer is also forbidden in religions. In Kumaon region Harin Chittal a folk drama is associate to conserve deer.



- Many Hindu deity such as Ganesh mount Rat, Kartik mount peacock, Lashkmi mount Owl, lord Vishnu mount Eagle (*Gorud*) and many more which gives messages for conservation.
- While the yak is not sacred but its bushy hair in tail is in great significance for fly-whisk (fan) in many Buddhist monasteries as well as in Hindu temples.
- There is a ritual of giving food grain and water pot for drinking water regularly for birds. That practice to conserve birds and stop getting hunt.



There are many medicinal plants and trees associates with various rituals and considered sacred with symbolizing various deities. For instance, *Aeglemarmelos (Bael)*, *saussurea obvallate (Brahma Kamal)*, *Ficus religiosa (Peepal)*, *Baniyan tree (Bargad)*, *holly ocimum sanctum (tulsi)*, *Datura flower*, *Azadirachta Indiac (Neem)*, *Grewia optiva (bheemal)*, *beal*. All of these are spiritually and religious important and have cultural value along with the emotional attachment. The Baniyan tree (*Bargad*) is very sacred among Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. *Tulsi* and *Peepal* have medicinal value. The belief and rituals is so strong that even people did not use the dried log of theses sacred plants for firewood or any other purpose. In Uttarakhand, a ritual called '**Maiti**' means the bridegroom plants a tree in the house of bride at the time of the wedding and the friends and relatives of the bride looking after and conserved the tree in memory of her. '*Harela*' a festival in Uttarakhand where everyone plants tees in nearby areas. "*Dhurang*" is a folk dance among Bhotia tribes the dance is perform during death ceremony with a belief that the soul of the dead person is in the body of either in goat or other animals. "*Chounphula*" the folk songs are composed to appreciation of nature during various occasions. '*Chounphula*' and '*Jhumeila*' are also folk dances that are preform at the occasion of *Basant Panchami* and *Sakranti* festivals.

In every Indian villages forest is considered sacred, and they believe it empowers his deities. Many

communities in various parts in our country worship forest as “*Parvat Devta*”, “*Van Devta*”, “*Van Durga*” as their presiding deity who take care of their domestic animals, control rain fall, flood and any other natural disaster. Lord Krishna lift *Govardhan Pahad* for his subjects during heavy rain to escape Indra’s anger, so people keeping a tradition to worship *Govardhan Puja*. The forest and its ecosystem which constituted with various plants and species conserving by the peoples contributes directly or indirectly for biodiversity conservation. It is also surprising in Hinduism that cutting standing green trees or its branches is a and against God and therefore discouraged. Even before harvesting medicinal plants for cure diseases, the plants are worshiped and special rituals are performed before and after harvest in their natural habitat. Tribal, forest communities and religious persons are doing so many practices to protect biodiversity and these practices practice for generations. In present times because of modern lifestyles and urbanization, people disconnect from nature gradually and forget their traditional custom & culture, become liberal in religious rituals, and withdraw from human spiritual ties to the natural world. But our old age tradition, culture, religion, and spirituality always influence our societies fundamental values towards conserve biodiversity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ruchika Sharma, Manoj Kumar Singh, and Sushma Tamta ; “Biodiversity of Uttarakhand: Major issues and Conservation Strategies” Interdisciplinary avenues in environmental and health challenges of Uttarakhand; May 2017. <http://www.fao.org/3/y3549e/y3549e13.htm#To pOfPage> Edwin Bernbaum “Sacred Mountains”; 9 Feb. 2021.
- [2] Sushma Singh, Mudasir Youssouf, Zubair A. Malik, and Rainer W. Bussmann “Sacred Groves: Myths, Beliefs, and Biodiversity Conservation—A Case Study from Western Himalaya, India” International Journal of Ecology Volume 2017, Article ID 3828609, 2017
- [3] Ashish Anthwal, Nutan Gupta, Archana Sharma, Smriti Anthwal, KI-Hyun Kima “Conserving biodiversity through traditional beliefs in sacred groves in Uttarakhand Himalaya, India” Resources, Conservation and Recycling; (International Journal of sustainable resource management and environment efficiency) volume 54; issue 11, September 2011
- [4] Center for Science and the Environment. “Sacred Groves: Last Refuge.” *Down to Earth Extra*, December 31, 2003.
- [5] Pandey, Deep Narayan. “Traditional Knowledge Systems for Biodiversity Conservation.” *Infinity Foundation*.
- [6] Chandra Prakash Kala, “ Sacred, a way of life” Down to Earth, 15 January 2018.
- [7] [http://ecoheritage.cpreec.org/innerpageof.php? \\$mFyC8&GgoA9](http://ecoheritage.cpreec.org/innerpageof.php? $mFyC8&GgoA9) Conservation of Ecological Heritage and Sacred Sites of India; Environmental Information System (ENVIS), C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre. 10 Feb. 2021.
- [8] <https://www.jdthoughts.com/2020/06/how-culture-religion-spirituality-conserve-biodiversity.html> “How culture, religion and spirituality help conserve biodiversity”, JDthoughts 02 June 2020.
- [9] <https://www.euttaranchal.com/tourism-theme/national-parks-and-wildlife-sanctuaries-62.php> eUttaranchal Website; 09 Feb. 2021.

Corresponding Author

Dr. Ashok Ku. Sahani*

Scientist- E, G B Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment, GRC, Srinagar Garhwal, Uttarakhand