

SACRED GROVES AS COMMONS: THE SACRED AND SECULAR IN PEOPLE'S DOMAIN

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I wish to explore the reality of sacred groves from a stance of multiplicity of meaning and interpretation. Every concrete natural-social feature on earth's surface is an embodiment and expression of a great multitude of natural and human impulses, energies, relations and creeds. Without this holistic understanding there is a serious danger of reductionism through which dimensions and categories of meaning distinct and autonomous get reduced into one-dimensional rationality. From this restriction of perception there is only a short step to theological, legal and technological definition, appropriation and incorporation in to the dominant systems of church, state and market management. This results in a permanent rupture and undermining of the human-nature relationship at the local community level, usually with adverse implications for both nature and people. In trying to describe and interpret the significance and regenerative potential of sacred groves we have to take cognizance of the whole range of natural, social and spiritual factors which have ensured their survival, relevance and importance.

Let us begin by recognizing that in Indian popular perception and practice there is no rigid division between the sacred and secular aspects of sacred groves. In Rajasthan there is usually an overlap between 'gochar' or common pasture and 'oran', the sacred woodlot around a temple. This is analogous to the sacred-secular attitudes and usages related to the cow. Shubhu Patwa*1, a journalist-activist in Bikaner, has done an extensive study of gochar-orans in western Rajasthan. He has shown that the existence of these pastures-groves is a part of an ancient tradition with built-in sense of the sacred and benefit to all. This tradition has played a vital role in the continuance and flourishing of animal husbandry based culture and economy of the communities in the Thar desert region. Both the ruler and the well-to-do traders used to take initiative in ensuring the protection of gochars. According to a 1937 state order a fine of Rs.25/was levied for grazing sheep in the gochar and Rs.11 for doing cultivation there. Earlier in 1733 a pasture of 500 hectares was set aside at the request of a trader named Nathu Shah. It is named after him as 'Sada Nathania'. Similarly, there is a record of a nearly 200 hectare oran around the famous Karnimata temple renowned as a refuge for rodents. No standing tree is allowed to be cut here and there is no commercial exploitation of the wood. When some trees had to be cut to put a railway line through this oran, the ruler prayed for the deity's permission and deposited Rs.100 per tree as compensation into the temple account.

In Udaipur area the sacred grove around Ubeshwar Mahadev (a Shiva temple) is surrounded by village pastures. This is close to the source of the local stream and is a watering and resting place for the cattle. By custom no cowdung is removed from this area. It is allowed to decay or dry. The dried dung-cakes are used for making baati (local bread) by villagers and other pilgrims who visit the temple at various festivals. In this arrangement the sanctity of the domain ensures the ready and plentiful availability of an important energy source for the benefit of all.

These examples suggest that the sacred groves are repositories not only of biotic and genetic diversity but are also foci of cultural and ethical practices and codes critical to the livelihood of the community based on land, water and vegetation, livestock and wildlife in its specific econiche. There is need for

much more detailed site and locality-wise study of this matrix of usage and belief related to sacred groves. We all know about the Bishnois of Rajasthan and their 29 point sacral ecological ethic for the protection of Khejri tree (*Prosopis cineraria*) and wildlife in their habitat. There are sufficient indications that similar codes of self and social regulation have evolved amongst other communities and have been sanctified and reinforced through association with sacred sites. These need to be re-discovered on a wide-ranging basis.

I now turn to a broader and more hoary aspect of the 'sacred' in the sacred groves, viz. the whole sense and concept of Vrindavan, the actual and mythical playgrove of Krishna, Radha and their companions. Let me invoke it vide a 'pad', or stanza, of the Hindi poet Ratnakar*2.

'Naval Vrindavan Sobha dham
Naval vasant naval malyanil taruvar naval lalam
Naval kusum makrand naval ras lolup naval milind
Naval Kisor naval lilarat naval kisor sang
Naval prem anand naval ati murchhit naval anang'

This is an ode to Vrindavan in spring. Here is an, inevitably inadequate, translation: -

"Behold the new Vrindavan, the glorious place of pilgrimage,
The new spring with fresh south breeze, and crimson saplings
And new buds with new fragrance and young bees greedy for nectar
The new peacocks and the new nightingales singing new melodies
The new youth dancing with young maidens, stricken by cupid
With new love and ecstasy beyond consciousness".

There is no need to elaborate here the many splendid hues and nuances, sensibilities and inspiration that the theme and motifs of Vrindavan have bequeathed to the folk and classical arts and to India's religiosity and spiritual quest. We are all familiar with Vrindavan as the abode of peace and harmony, as the venue of Radha's yearning for and meeting with Krishna, and k, above all, "as the earthly counterpart of goloka which comes into being with the avatar or incarnation of Krishna with all His playful abandon, ecstasy and bliss. *3

My purpose is drawing attention to this expansive aspect of the sacred in sacred groves is two-fold. First, I wish to suggest that together with the eco-sociology there is an aesthetic religious aspect of these groves that await discovery. Its expressions are in the folklore, songs, rituals and festivals performed around these places. Second, there is a need to recognize the connections and parallels between the local and specific manifestations and traditions and the overarching, universal concepts like Vrindavan. There is ample evidence that the larger currents of Bhakti movement and local traditions are informed by the same cultural and civilizational *bodh* and *samvedna*. And, as the literary spiritual creativity of Kabir, Nanak, Mira, Dadu, Farid, Amit Khusro, Raskhan, Rahim and Tagore testifies, these sensibilities and inspiration transcend sectarian boundaries.

Finally, let me look at sacred groves as examples of commons. This extends the meaning of commons beyond common property resources. For this I shall take the concept of commons enunciated by the well-known thinker Ivan Illich*4. According to him 'Commons are a cultural space that lies beyond my threshold and this side of wilderness. Custom defines the different usefulness of commons for each one. The commons are porous. The same spot for different purposes can be used by different people. And, above all, custom protects the commons. The commons are not community resources, the commons become a resource only when the lord or community encloses them. Enclosure transmogrifies commons into a resource for the extraction, production or circulation of commodities. Commons are as vernacular as vernacular speech'. This depiction of commons has even greater validity in the case of sacred groves with their multiplicity of purposes, customary protection, lack of enclosure, non-commodity character and location 'this side of wilderness' as an expression of the divine.

In the foregoing discussion, I have tried to recognize sacred groves as:

- refugia for bio-genetic diversity*5
- repositories of ethno-social codes of relation and regulation via a vis nature
- Venues of local and universal manifestation of aesthetic traditions and religiosity.
- community resources
- commons or cultural space between private domain and the rest of cosmos.

In all these characteristics sacred groves have undergone decline and shrinkage with the growth of contemporary systems of natural resource management dominated by global elitist privatization, statization, energy intensive technology and commodity markets. Today all these arrangements are themselves in a state of crisis and faced with unsustainability in the future. This has led to the search for new patterns and sources of insight for human-nature relationship, natural resource management, maintenance of biodiversity and recovery of commons. Study of sacred groves in all their manifold meaning offers a rich field for this exploration.

References: I gratefully acknowledge the help of Shri Prahlad Narain Vajpayee of Sahitya Sansthan, Rajasthan Vidyapeeth regarding references to Vrindavan.

*1 Patwa, Shubhu 'Paryavarana Ki Sanskriti' (Hindi) Vagdevi Prakashan 1989, Bikaner.

*2 Padratnakar (Hindi) by Ratnakar

*3 Parashar, Dr. Santosh 'Hindi Krishna Kavaya Mein Bhaki Evam Vedanta'

*4 Illich, Ivan 'The Recovery of Commons' Resurgence No. 106 Worthyvale Manor Farm. Sept – Oct. 1984, Camelford Cornwall PL329TT, U.K.

*5 Gadgil, Madhav 'Social Restraints on Exploiting Nature' PPST Bulletin, Madras Vol. 3 No.1, 1983.