

# Periodic Research

## A Study of Sacred Groves Existing in Different Religious Patches of Poonch District

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### Abstract

The practice of dedicating groves to local deities has a long history. They are the ancient natural sanctuaries where all forms of living creatures are given protection by deity. These sacred groves have been traditional means of biodiversity are the patches of forest that support forest-dwelling species within non-forest matrix. Sacred groves are not only the sacred ecosystems functioning as a rich repository of nature's unique biodiversity, but also a product of the socio-ecological philosophy, our forefathers have been cherishing since olden days. Many of these pristine ecosystems have either vanished or are disturbed to a great extent. But those still existing are living instances of Carbon pools and nature's preserved uniqueness.

Poonch district is the land of saints, sages, great philosophers and mystics. There are several sacred groves having rich diverse flora and their documentation did not get any attention so far. The present piece of work comprises study of 9 such most popular sacred groves in which woody flora belonging to 24 families was observed with dominance of the family Rosaceae.

**Keywords:** Biodiversity, Documentation, Flora, Sacred Groves, Socio-Ecological Philosophy, Wood.

### Introduction

Sacred groves are the excellent traditional concept to maintain environment at village or regional level. The sacred groves consist of a Shrine for the God / Goddess with a pond tank surrounded by a small forest or dense trees. Within these groves are locked ancient sacred herbs and traditional medicinal plants, primitive practices of sorcery and magic. These groves are conserved and preserved on religious grounds and exist in several parts of the world.

Sacred groves are symbolic of single genetic resources and play an important role in conservation and management of a bio-diversity. The socio- economical, medicinal and environmental importance of these plants was recognized and sacred trees evolved as a means of conserving lands rich genetic plant diversity. Sacred plants provide food, shelter and nesting beside substratum for several species of birds and squirrels. Some species are totally protected. Banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*), Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) and Indian Fig (*Ficus glomerata*) are afforded total protection. *Ficus* is considered as key stone resource playing a significant role in conservation of many insects, birds and mammals. It is also an important species providing site for beehive to honey bees. The five most sacred leaves of Pipal, Cluster of white Fig, *Ficus lacor*, Banyan and Mangoes are employed in making prayers and offerings. On auspicious occasions, mango leaves are tied to a string and hung on the doors as a welcome banner and leaves of Plash and Banyan make workable plates and bowls during community feasts.

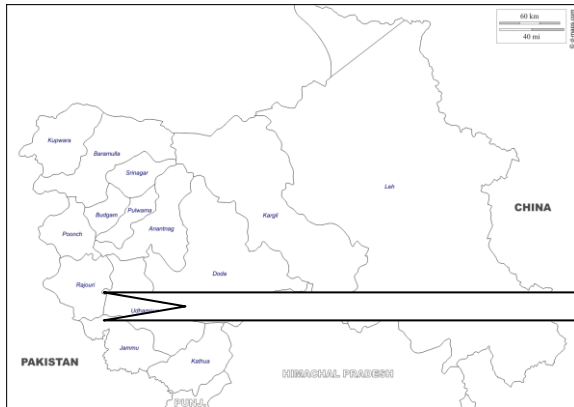
In Jammu and Kashmir 150 sacred groves are reported ranging from 0.4 to 1374 acres which are managed by religious bodies. The Shankaracharya sacred grove is a reserve forest being maintained by Govt. for aesthetic and recreational purposes, (Kumar *et al.* 2011) reported among angiosperms and gymnosperms 60 families and 229 genera. Asteraceae was the largest with 45 species and other important families were Poaceae, Rosaceae, Papilionaceae, Lamiaceae, Ranunculaceae and Apiaceae. Small groves are highly protected and any removal is a taboo (Dar *et al.*, 2002).

### Study Area

Poonch one of the floral diversitic district of Jammu & Kashmir is located at between 33°25' to 34°01' North latitude and between 73°58' to

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74°35' East longitude. The range of mountains separates Poonch Valley from the Kashmir Valley. On the other hand it is separated from Rajouri District with two small passes Bhimber Gali and Dera Gali. The climate of Poonch is some what cooler than the



rest of the Duggardesh plains. Summers are short and usually pleasant. The summer temperature generally does not rise above 31°C. Winters are cool and characterized by rainfall due to western disturbances.



## Identification

The plant species were identified with the help of experts and published literature in the flora of [Hooker, 1872-97; Stewart, 1972; Singh and Kirm, 1981; Sharma and Kachroo, 1981-82; Kirm, 1992; Singh, 1992; Vir Jee et al., 1984; Dar et al., 2009; Malik et al., 2010; Dar et al., 2014].

## Sacred Groves in Religious Patches of Poonch District (J&K)

In PirPanjal region of Jammu and Kashmir people don't maintain sacred groves on large scale as is done in Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and other states perhaps because there are dense forests being managed by Govt. through Forest Deptt. Time is not far when people will surely feel the necessity of maintaining sacred groves when the existing forests will vanish in near future. Nevertheless there are sacred groves at a very small scale on religious grounds out of reverence, fear, sentiments and respect for trees growing in holy shrines from times immemorial (Kumar et al. 2011; Dar et al., 2002). In Poonch district such 9 sacred groves were surveyed with a focus on existing woody flora.

**Chhote Shah Badshah Mendhar** sacred grove, a few giant wild olive trees (*Olea ferruginea*) growing from centuries with association of Chinar (*Platanus orientalis*) trees and Poplar (*Populus nigra*) trees make an umbrella within the compound walls of the shrine area. The locals including visiting devotees can never think of cutting even a twig from sacred grove. Among the ground flora the common species of the plants are small shrubs like *Berberis lycium*, *Ziziphus jujube* and *Carrisaopaca*. As all the ground of the shrine is cemented except the few patches where the plants are growing.

**Dharian Sacred Grove** situated 18 km. from Poonch city on the Poonch Jammu road between main road and river bed of Suran Nallah in Dharian hemlet in village Madana, Tehsil Surankote (Plate 1.1 & 1.2). It is believed and narrated that famous spiritual Sain Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah while travelling from Punjab to Shahdara Sharif halted at this place for 22 years. He stayed on a rock in river bed and worshipped during this period of his stay at

SuranNallah was terribly swollen but did not hit the place of worship and splitted in two parts. The grove has occupied about 10 ha. area. The devotees travelling on this route in Buses, Trucks and light vehicles halt at this place, pay homage, donate money by putting it in locked box on the road side building.

The maintenance of Shrine and sacred grove besides a double storey Mosque and Madarsa including stairs from road side to the Central located worship place of shrine is done by a local Committee. A langer (Free food) is also run for visiting devotees in this cool, clean and peaceful grove under the thick shade consisting of trees, shrubs and herbs (Table 1). The ground flora of the sacred grove is predominantly covered by a lot of herbs, grasses, and ferns. The entire land under sacred grove is shady and cool and as such there is no possibility of height demanding species such as Chir pine or Cedar pine.



1.1: Aerial view of Dharian Sacred Grove Plate



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1.2: Frontal view of Dharian Sacred Grove Plate  
Table 1: Flora of Dharian Sacred Grove  
(Lassana Surankote)

Local Name	Botanical name	Family
<b>The upper storey is predominated by the trees</b>		
Mannu	<i>Ulmus villosa</i> Bradis ex Gamble	Ulmaceae
Khirak/Betkair	<i>Celtis australis</i> L.	Ulmaceae
Eucalyptus	<i>Eucalyptus citridora</i> Hook	Myrtaceae
Poplar	<i>Populus nigra</i> L.	Salicaceae
Walnut	<i>Juglans regia</i> L.	Juglandaceae
Champ/Sarol	<i>Alnus nitida</i> (Spach) Endl.	Betulaceae
Oak (Rein)	<i>Quercus incana</i> Roxb.	Fagaceae
Breen	<i>Quercus glauca</i> Thunb.	Fagaceae
<b>The trees growing in second storey</b>		
Cypress	<i>Cupressus torulosa</i> D. Don	Cupressaceae
Batangi	<i>Pyrus pashia</i> Buch. Ham. ex D. Don	Rosaceae
Drek	<i>Melia azedarach</i> L.	Meliaceae
Amlok	<i>Diospyros lotus</i> L.	Ebenaceae
Black locust	<i>Robinia pseudoacacia</i> L.	Papilionaceae
Beesa	<i>Salix alba</i> L.	Salicaceae
Drava	<i>Cedrella serrata</i> Royle.	Meliaceae
Kikar	<i>Acacia Senegal</i> (Linn.) Willd.	Mimosaceae
Tarkanna	<i>Acer caesium</i> Wall ex Brandis	Aceraceae
Bottle brush	<i>Callistemon citrinus</i> (Curtis) Stapf.	Myrtaceae
Kankoli	<i>Elaeagnus umbellate</i> Thunb.	Elaeagnaceae
Anardana	<i>Punica granatum</i> L.	Punicaceae
Timmer	<i>Zanthoxylum armatum</i> DC.	Rutaceae
<b>Predominant woody ground flora</b>		
Simlu	<i>Berberis lycium</i> Royle.	Berberidaceae
Tarnari	<i>Rosa moschata</i> Mill.	Rosaceae
Pakran	<i>Prinsepia utilis</i> Royle.	Rosaceae
Aakhrey	<i>Rubus ellipticus</i> Smith.	Rosaceae
Ghulab	<i>Rosa indica</i> L.	Rosaceae
Khokhri	<i>Randia tetrasperma</i> (Roxb) Bth. & Hkf	Rubiaceae

## Banwat Hissab

A sacred grove consisting of giant sized evergreen olive trees (*Olea ferruginea*) is existing in the heart of the village. In the center of grove there is shrine of Baba Mosa Ghazi (Plate 2). Local inhabitants have been protecting the grove from centuries and believe that who even cut a branch of any tree of sacred grove will turn blind.



Plate 2:A View of Sacred Grove at Banwat Hissab. Sultan Shah Ghazi sacred grove is situated in Mohalla Saiyaddan of village Shiendara, Tehsil Surankote on link road from Shiendara to Kalaban Mendhar (Plate 3.1 & 3.2). The grove of different tree species has occupied about 2 ha. area. This holy grove of Sultan Shah Ghazi and Akbar Shah Ghazi are honored under one beautiful tomb.



Plate 3.1:An Outer View of Sultan Shah Ghazi Sacred Grove



Plate3.2:A Frontal View of Sultan Shah Ghazi Sacred Grove.

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**Table 2: The Main Species of Trees and Shrubs of Sultan Shah Ghazi Sacred Grove.**

Local Name	Botanical name	Family
Batkair/ Khirak	<i>Celtis australis</i> L.	Ulmaceae
Mannu	<i>Ulmus villosa</i> Brandis ex Gamble.	Ulmaceae
Drava	<i>Cedrella serrata</i> Royle	Meliaceae
Hari	<i>Prunus armeniaca</i> L.	Rosaceae
Karoon/Toot	<i>Morus alba</i> L.	Moraceae
Breen	<i>Quercus glauca</i> Thunb.	Fagaceae
Amlook	<i>Diospyrus lotus</i> L.	Ebenaceae
Ailanthus	<i>Ailanthus altissima</i> (Mill) Swingle	Simarubaceae
Kandar	<i>Cornus macrophylla</i> Wall.	Cornaceae
Anardana / Daruna	<i>Punica granatum</i> L.	Punicaceae
Aakhrey	<i>Rubus ellipticus</i> Smith.	Rosaceae
Simlu	<i>Berberis lycium</i> Royle.	Berberidaceae
Pakran	<i>Prinsepia utilis</i> Royle.	Rosaceae
Sandhoori	<i>Debregeasia salicifolia</i> (D.Don) Rendle	Urticaceae

**Shiendara** grove is situated near the other grove of Sultan Shah Ghazi below the link road Shiendara to Kalaban and known by the name Ziarat of Akbar Shah Ghazi (Plate 4). Chinar trees (*Platanus orientalis*) planted by Sain Akbar Shah Ghazi have grown giant with other associate species (Table 3). The maintenance of this grove is also in the hands of local Committee.



**Plate 4: A View of the Shiendara Sacred Grove**

**Table 3: Woody Plant Species at Shiendara Sacred Grove**

Local Name	Botanical name	Family
Chinar	<i>Platanus orientalis</i> L.	Platanaceae
Cypruss	<i>Cupressus torulosa</i> D.Don	Cupressaceae
Pipal	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> L.	Moraceae
Breen	<i>Quercus glauca</i> Thunb.	Fagaceae
Amlook	<i>Diospyrus lotus</i> L.	Ebenaceae
Ban Oak	<i>Quercus incana</i> Roxb.	Fagaceae
Kikar	<i>Acacia Senegal</i> (Linn.) Willd.	Mimosaceae
Timmer	<i>Zanthoxylum armatum</i> DC.	Rutaceae
Simlu	<i>Berberis lycium</i> Royle.	Berberidaceae
Tarnari	<i>Rosa moschata</i> Mill.	Rosaceae
Pakran	<i>Prinsepia utilis</i> Royle.	Rosaceae

Aakhrey	<i>Rubus ellipticus</i> Smith.	Rosaceae
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**Pir Mithey Shah** sacred grove over about two kanal land is situated in hamlet Dalera of village Bhainchh between Jhullas river and Rawalpindi road (Plate 5). The candles are burnt 24 hours and a locked box called *Bughni* has been kept by local Committee for donation.

**Plate 5: A View of the Pir Mithey Shah Sacred Grove Dalera**

The entire area has been fenced and floor cemented. The main giant tree standing over centre of the grove is that of Batkair (*Celtis australis*) with strange looking branches (Table 4).

**Table 4: Woody Species Growing at PirMithey Shah Sacred Grove Dalera**

Local name	Botanical name	Family
Khirak/Batkair	<i>Celtis australis</i> L.	Ulmaceae
Kohu	<i>Olea ferruginea</i> Royle.	Oleaceae
Dhamman	<i>Grewia optiva</i> Drummond ex Burret	Tiliaceae
Drek	<i>Melia azedarach</i> L.	Meliaceae
Ailanthus	<i>Ailanthus altissima</i> (Mill) Swingle	Simarubaceae
Kankoli	<i>Elaeagnus umbellata</i> Thunb.	Elaeagnaceae
Ber	<i>Zizyphus jujube</i> Mill.	Rhamnaceae
Simlu	<i>Berberis lycium</i> Royle.	Berberidaceae

**Baba Bhairo-Nath Temple** situated in village Bhainchh on the main road of Poonch Jammu just 5 km. away from Poonch city (Plate 6). A small area underneath a giant tree of (Khirak) *Celtis australis* with main associated (Toot) *Morus alba*. As the whole of the floor of sacred grove around temple is cemented only a few patches remain vacant where small shrubs of *Berberis lycium* are growing along the giant tree.



**Plate 6: A View of Baba Bhairo Nath Sacred Grove Bhainchh**

**Central Eidgah** sacred grove is situated in proper city near Bgd. Pritam Singh Chowk is on about 2 ha. area has been fenced with its compound walls in cemented masonry. Namaz-e-Eid and Friday prayers are offered here. There are several rows of Chinar trees (*Platanus orientalis*) planted by Saint Darvaish Ghulam Qadir (Table 5).



**Table 5: Species of Trees in Central Eidgah, Poonch City**

Local Name	Botanical Name	Family
Chinar	<i>Platanus orientalis</i> L.	Platanaceae
Mannu	<i>Ulmus villosa</i> Brandis ex Gamble	Ulmaceae
Poplar	<i>Populus nigra</i> L.	Salicaceae
Cyperus	<i>Cupressus torulosa</i> D. Don	Cupressaceae
Drek	<i>Melia azadarach</i> L.	Meliaceae
Silky Oak	<i>Grevilia robusta</i> A. Cunn. ex R.Br.	Proteaceae
Bottle brush	<i>Callistemon lanceolatus</i> DC.	Myrtaceae

**Danna Shah Sitar** sacred grove is a holy shrine of Shah Sitar situated on the top of water parting ridge between Mendhar Tehsil and Suran kote having commanding view of vast area including Pak Administration Kashmir and snow laden peaks of Pir Panjal ridge (Plate 7). The tree species that are preserved are Oak (*Quercus incana*) and Chir (*Pinus roxburghii*). The other species include Simlu (*Berberis lycium*) which have been conserved and preserved by local inhabitants with religious sentiments, reverence and respect. People also believe that the knee impression of a divine body was pressed in a rock adjoining historical small stone Mosque.



**Plate 7: A View of Sacred Grove at Danna Shah Sitar Mendhar**

## Discussions

Many Indian communities are still preserving specific small forests with high diversity of species called "Sacred groves". At least 13,720 sacred groves have been reported in various regions of the country, experts estimate that the actual number is likely 100,000 to 150,000 (Pushpangadan *et al.*, 1998; Ramakrishnan, 1998, 2001). Prominent groves are mainly distributed in the states of Andhra Pradesh (WWF, 1996), Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Maharashtra (Vartak and Gadgil, 1981; Deshmukh *et al.*, 1998), in Rajasthan the area exceeds thousands of acres (Khiewtan and Ramaskrishana, 1989; Tripathi *et al.*, 1995; Malhotra *et al.*, 1999; Jamir and Pandey, 2002), Uttar Pradesh (Sinha and Maikhuri, 1998), Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Pondichery, Gujrat, Goa, West Bengal, and some northeastern states such as Meghalaya (Tiwari *et al.*, 1998).

Sacred groves reflect ancient Indian traditions of conservation, preservation and

management by local communities out of reverence, fear and sentiments and described as museum of giant trees, treasure houses of threatening species, dispensaries of medicinal plants, regulators of watersheds, recreation centers for urban citizenry, variable gardens for Botanists, gene banks of economic species like Sandal tree (*Santalum album*), Agar tree (*Aquilaria malaccensis*), Rubber tree (*Ficus elastica*), Deodar (*Cedrus deodara*), Teak tree (*Tactona grandis*) and paradise for lovers of nature and laboratories of environmentalists.

In some states in India people have taboos that violation of preservation result in failure of crop, sickness in family and diseases to live stocks. In some groves people are permitted by priests in charge of sacred groves to use roots, leaves and twigs of certain medicinal plants. Sheep, hen and goats are sacrificed for health of groves in Tamil Nadu and some other southern states of India. Groves in Rajasthan are called ORANS managed by a local tribe "Bish-Noi" they put complete ban on cutting of tree or killing of an animal. In Jaisalmer the worshippers have prepared a garden having good qualities Ber trees (*Zizyphus jujuba*) so that animals and birds do not starve without food. In Ladakh and Sikkim sacred groves are called GUMPHAS and are managed by Buddhists. In Kerala more than 750 sacred groves are managed and maintained by 'KUVAS'. In Manipur and Meghalaya such sacred groves are maintained by 'NAGAM' tribes who go for meditation and worship in the said groves.

In Hoshiarpur district of Punjab sacred grove named 'Shiv Bari' people believe that whosoever will cut down even a twig of trees will die at once. This is an excellent typical grove where Research Scholars can study the succession of plants and find that in due course of evolution of new species and conclude that mixed deciduous trees of various species have been replaced by evergreen species in post climax stage.

In Kili-aal-Amman Tamilnadu sacred grove (Ramanujam and Praveen, 2003) 45 plant species belonging to 33 families are found in this sacred grove among them few important are *Callophylum nuphyllum* (Clusiaceae), *Ficus hispida* (Moraceae), *Ficus amplissima* (Moraceae), *Ficus racemosa* (Moraceae), *Acacia sp.* (Mimosaceae), *Azadirachta indica* (Meliaceae), *Lepisanthes tetraphylla* (Sapindaceae), *Pongamia pinnata* (Fabaceae), *Paramignya monophylla* (Rutaceae), *Syzygium cumini* (Myrtaceae), *Dioscorea oppositifolia* (Dioscoreaceae), *Phoenix pusilla* (Arecaceae), *Ecbolium viridi* (Acanthaceae), *Calamus rotang* (Arecaceae), *Tinospora cordifolia* (Menispermaceae), *Coccinia indica* (Cucurbitaceae), *Aristolochia indica* (Aristolochiaceae), *Asparagus racemosus* (Asparagaceae), *Combretum albidum* (Phytoseidae) etc.

Kodi Manglam Tamilnadu Sacred grove does not practice sacrifice of animals. Some of the species of grove are *Terminalia arjuna* (Combretaceae), *Crataeva religiosa* (Capparaceae), *Azadirachta indica* (Meliaceae), *Prosopis juliflora* (Fabaceae), *Dellenia indica* (Dilleniaceae), *Atlantia monophylla* (Rutaceae), *Achyranthes aspera* (Amaranthaceae), *Zizyphus jujuba* (Rhamnaceae), *Borassus flabellifer*

(Arecaceae), *Acacia nilotica* (Fabaceae) etc. Lianas are present in this groves which act as an indicators of forests. Besides there is also faunal diversity Indian Cobra (*Naja naja*), Ratal snake (*Rtyas mucosus*), Bronze black tree snake (*Dendse laphistrislin*), Dragon fly, Domsel fly, Ground beetle, Rhinoceros beetle, Jewel beetle and common Butterflies. Peacocks and monkeys are dominant species besides Koel and common Crow (Arulananthan, 2006).

### Conservation Measures

Attention should be paid for proper documentation of the resources of these sacred groves. Continued conservation of these sacred groves is obviously desirable both for a practical and aesthetic point of view by properly educating the people.

In the settlement areas, fencing the groves would help in reducing grazing and other human intervention, especially, encroaching the grove area. Exploitation of sacred groves can be prevented by making stringent laws. Reforestation of groves by planting native plant species or species similar to that in the nearby groves, may help the survival and growth of many species. Water resources and vegetation should be maintained and all these areas should be made no polythene zone.

### Conclusion

Whereas 951sq. Km. of demarcated forests of district Poonch are being managed by Government through Forest and Social Forestry departments and Forest Protection Force with hundreds of field and ministerial staff fully equipped with powers of awarding punishment and fine for violation of Forest Act, Kuth Act, Grazing Act, Tress-pass Act, and Forest conservation Act of 1997, even then the land Mafia and Timber Mafia escape un-punished. Thousands of hectares of forest land have been encroached causing irreparable loss of fast deteriorating environment and collapsing ecological equilibrium. Forest area is shrinking every now and then. According to IUCN 2000 Red list data, India contributes nearly 3% of world's total number of threatened species. This includes 86 species of mammals, 70 species of birds, 25 species of reptiles and 3 species of amphibians. Among plants, 19 species are extinct, 44 are critically endangered, 113 are endangered and 87 are vulnerable (Khoshoo, 1986, 1994; Khurana, 1998; Kotwal and Banerjee, 2000).

What is required is that massive awareness campaign with people's participation, cooperation and coordination to save and preserve the fast polluting environment should be launched among farmers, women folk and student community at school, college and university level including people residing in urban and rural area through public meetings, seminars, public rallies, green march and farmers camps so as to create awareness and inculcate the sense of protection of green heritage for onward transmission to next generation.

Time has arrived when we should follow footsteps towards principles of *Bish-nois* of Rajasthan, *Buddhists* of Ladakh and Sikkim, *Kuvas* of Kerala and devotees of Tamil Nadu who have preserved the

diversity of flora and fauna by maintaining large scale traditional sacred groves. People should also follow the principle of *Chipko* movement launched by S.L. Bahugona from the hills of Garhwal region.

It is suggested that the devotees who visit Shrines, Temples, Gurudawaras and Church should be blessed with bag-saplings of commercial species like *Jatropha*, *Chandan*, *Agar*, *Teak*, *Deodar*, *Chir*, and ornamental plants for planting in pots, back yards, kitchen gardens and agricultural farms rather than distribution of sweet (*Laddo*, *Phullian*, *Halwa* and *Makhana* etc.)

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