



STRENGTHENING SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AND BIODIVERSITY ACROSS
LANDSCAPES IN EASTERN & WESTERN GHATS OF INDIA (SABAL)
(GEF ID –10204: 2022-2027)

A CASE STUDY ON
**CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT OF SACRED
GROVES: Myths and Beliefs of Tribal Communities
from Bairluty Landscape of Andhra Pradesh**

1. Introduction

Traditional and indigenous communities in India are of the religious belief that medicinal groves and plants are sacred in nature. Sacred groves (SGs) are patches of trees on forest land that are protected communally with religious zeal and connotations. These forest areas have been protected since ages by traditional societies and indigenous communities with their socio-cultural and religious practices. Sacred groves as a rule are treated piously.

Sacred trees are prohibited from cutting and not axed except when wood is needed for the religious purposes like construction and repair of temple buildings or in cases like worshipping, death ceremonies and temple rituals. Thus, SGs carry direct and everlasting pious status and assist in maintaining social fabric of the society. From the present study it is concluded that, religious identification of medicinal plants and practices have influenced the folklore towards a sense of selfless services in the name the Gods. However, due to modernization, mechanization and globalization in the recent past has transformed and weakened both cultural

and biological integrity. Changes in social belief, modernization and erosion of cultural practices are some of the major factors contributing towards degradation of the ancient institutional heritage which need to be investigated. The present study is, therefore intended to propose management and conservation as an alternative strategy towards the sustainability of forests around human settlements and an attempt to explore the role of SGs in conservation and management of different ecosystem services.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted in the Bairluty landscape, Nandyala district, Andhra Pradesh. A mixed-methods approach was employed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data.

2.1 Field Surveys: Extensive field surveys were carried out to identify and document the sacred groves in the region. GPS mapping was used to delineate the boundaries and measure the area of each grove.

2.2 Interviews and Focus Groups: In-depth interviews and focus group

discussions were conducted with elders, community leaders, and other members of the tribal communities to understand the myths, beliefs, and traditional practices associated with the sacred groves.

2.3 Literature Review: Relevant literature on sacred groves and traditional ecological knowledge was reviewed to provide a contextual background and support the findings of the study.

2.4 Biodiversity Assessment: Flora and fauna surveys were conducted to assess the biodiversity within the sacred groves. Standard ecological methods, including quadrat sampling for vegetation and transect walks for wildlife observation, were used.

3. Results and Discussions

Three sacred groves have been identified in the Nagalooty Gudem village, located within the Bairluty landscape. These groves are centred around significant religious sites that play a vital role in the local culture and traditions.

3.1 Veerabhadra Swamy Temple:

The sacred grove dedicated to Veerabhadraswamy in the Nallamalai forest, particularly in the Bairluty landscape, holds profound religious and cultural significance. Veerabhadraswamy is honored as the guardian deity of Srisaila Mahakshetra, a revered site within the region. The temple, unique for its open roof, is known as "Bayalu Veerabhadra Swamy," symbolizing the unfiltered divine protection that the deity extends to his devotees.





Significance of Veerabhadra Swamy

Veerabhadra Swamy is considered the foremost deity among the local pantheon, bestowing security and auspiciousness upon his followers. Worshipping this deity is believed to ward off Graha Doshas (planetary faults) and remove all ills. Devotees have deep faith that, regardless of the severity of their problems, all issues will be resolved, and accidents will be avoided. This divine intervention ensures compatibility and success in their endeavors, fulfilling their deeper desires.

Cultural and Social Impact

The temple is a hub of activity during major festivals such as Shivaratri and

Ugadi, attracting many worshippers. These festivals are celebrated with great enthusiasm, underscoring the cultural importance of Veerabhadra Swamy in the community. The temple's influence extends beyond spiritual aspects, significantly impacting the local economy. Approximately 20 families from Nagalooty Gudem Village rely on the temple for their livelihood, highlighting its role in supporting the local community.

Tribals Livelihood - Maha Shivarathri to Ugadi Festival



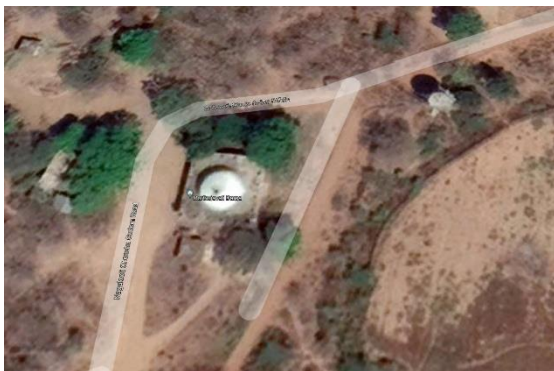
Widespread Devotion

Devotees from various states, including Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu, visit the sacred grove, showcasing its wide-reaching spiritual appeal. This diverse influx of worshippers reinforces

the universal reverence for Veerabhadra Swamy and the temple's role as a spiritual sanctuary.

3.2 Dargah

The Dargah in Nagalloty Gudem is a shrine built in memory of a revered Sufi saint. It serves as a spiritual hub for followers of Islam in the region. The grove surrounding the Dargah is maintained with great reverence, reflecting the syncretic traditions that characterize the area. It is a site of communal harmony where people from different faiths come together to offer prayers and seek blessings.



Historical and Spiritual Significance

The sacred grove in the Nallamalai forest, particularly in the Bairlutu landscape, is steeped in intriguing history and spiritual significance, primarily centered around the Naguluti Pedda Dargaya Swamy Dargah. The story of this revered site

begins with a Muslim laborer named Padda Durgayya, who tended to cows owned by another individual.

The Legacy of Padda Durgayya

Padda Durgayya resided in a humble hut on the eastern hill, diligently overseeing the grazing cows. A remarkable event marked Padda Durgayya's legacy: while he slept, a swarm of ants consumed over half of his body. Despite this harrowing ordeal, he survived and continued to communicate normally for two days. This astonishing resilience perplexed the villagers, who ultimately decided to bury him alive. Yet, even from his grave, Padda Durgayya's voice persisted, echoing through the surroundings.

Transformation and Veneration

As time passed, his divine manifestation became divided, leading to his veneration as Lord Durga. This transition is fascinating, as it bridges religious and cultural divides. Although Padda Durgayya was of the Muslim faith, some self-professed Muslims claim exclusive rights to his veneration. Historically, the Chenchus, an indigenous tribal community, had performed the pooja services at the site.

Symbol of Syncretism

The Nagalooty Pedda Dargaya Swamy Dargah stands as a symbol of this unique confluence of faiths and traditions. The sacred grove in the Nallamalai forest, with its rich history and spiritual resonance, continues to attract devotees from diverse backgrounds. It represents a remarkable blend of religious syncretism, where the veneration of a Muslim laborer transformed into the worship of a Hindu deity, illustrating the deep-rooted cultural and spiritual connections within the region.



3.3 Anjaneya Swamy Temple

Dedicated to Anjaneya Swamy, also known as Lord Hanuman, this temple in

Nagalooty Gudem is a significant religious site. The grove surrounding the temple is preserved as a sacred space, reflecting the villagers' respect for the environment and their belief in the divine presence in nature. Festivals dedicated to Hanuman make the temple especially popular, attracting devotees from nearby regions.



The Sacred Grove and Environmental Conservation

These sacred groves are not only important for their religious significance but also play a crucial role in conserving local biodiversity. They serve as natural sanctuaries, preserving various plant and animal species that thrive in these protected areas. The cultural and ecological importance of these groves underscores the need for their preservation amidst modern developmental pressures.

Gosai Anjaneya Swamy: A Local Spiritual Haven

Locally known as Gosai Anjaneya Swamy due to its proximity to Gosai Pond (Cheruvu), this sacred grove holds a special place in the hearts of the villagers. Historically, the Chechus were dedicated to conducting rituals at this shrine. Today, several tribal members continue to carry out their worship practices here, maintaining a connection to their ancestral traditions.



Historical Significance of the Anjaneya Swamy Temple

The origin of the Anjaneya Swamy Temple dates to a historical era when reigning kings established the deity. This divine presence was intended to safeguard pilgrims traveling from Pinnapuram to Nagulati route to Srisailam, protecting them from untamed creatures and malevolent spirits.

Gosai Pond: A Remarkable Feat of Construction

The construction of the adjacent Gosai Pond was a remarkable feat, accomplished with the assistance of elephants. This body of water is intricately connected with the identity of the Gosai Anjaneya Swamy Temple, highlighting the ingenuity and dedication of the community in creating and maintaining this sacred site.



Conclusion

The study highlights the profound significance of sacred groves (SGs) in the Bairluty landscape, Nandyala district, Andhra Pradesh, demonstrating their pivotal role in preserving cultural and biological integrity. Sacred groves such as those dedicated to Veerabhadra Swamy, Anjaneya Swamy, and the Naguluti Pedda Dargaya Swamy Dargah serve as critical cultural and spiritual hubs, fostering community cohesion and contributing to

local livelihoods. However, modernization, mechanization, and globalization have led to a degradation of these ancient practices and the biological diversity they help preserve.

The findings underscore the necessity of integrating traditional ecological knowledge with modern conservation strategies to ensure the sustainability of these forest areas. This study advocates for the active involvement of local communities in the management and conservation of SGs, emphasizing their role in maintaining ecosystem services and cultural heritage. Preserving these groves is essential not only for environmental conservation but also for safeguarding the socio-cultural fabric of traditional and indigenous communities.

