

THE RELIGIOUS, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FOREST LANDSCAPES IN UTTARAKHAND HIMALAYA, INDIA

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to understand the community behavior of cultural and tradition rich forested landscapes towards the conservation and management of forest resources. The present study was conducted in five selected protected forests (Chanderbadni, Jameswar, Ulkagari, Ansuiya Devi and Maroor) located in four districts of Garhwal Himalaya, India. Conservation practices and belief system was discussed with local inhabitants residing within and around the vicinity of these forests. A well-structured semi-structured questionnaire dataset was developed for formal and informal discussions with the communities. Deities of both genders are worshiped; however, people have more faith in feminine deities compared to male deities. The awareness among villagers regarding the conservation is historical. Different festivals and traditional celebrations are held to keep the heritage intact with younger generations. No use of weapons, restrictions to pregnant women, and ban on spitting and making of toilets around the core zones has restricted the entry by the local communities. Demarcation around the boundaries by red flags or statues of gods or goddesses have been erected in the forested landscapes to put votive offerings, which ultimately give protection to these landscapes in the form of social conservation.

Keywords: Religion; Tradition; Conservation; Communities; Demarcation.

Introduction

The indigenous conservation has often been attributed to a spiritual respect for, and a practical understanding of the natural world [1, 2]. Evidences offered in support of this characterization, include the culturally expressed conservation ethics, animistic religious beliefs that conceptualizes other species as social beings, and relatively higher biodiversity richness found within the sacred forests in the homelands of these people [3, 4]. Natural resources and people are intrinsically linked. Religious, moral, cultural, political, economic and ecological boundaries have all shaped environmental use and perceptions [5]. Historically, attitudes and behavior towards the environment and sustainable use of resources have been greatly affected

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and determined by nature worship and spiritual values [6, 7]. Various entities can be considered to be sacred, and are found throughout the world [8]. They can be defined as “sacred places such as mountains, lakes, and rivers; sacred objects like stones, religious scriptures; sacred images of the supernatural; and living things including animals and forests [9, 10].

The practice of religious rituals, ceremonies and sanctions by specific cultural groups allow such sacred landscapes to be maintained, emphasizing that humans are intrinsically part of the ecosystem [9]. Taboos, codes and customs specific to activities and community members restrict access to most sacred groves [10]. In fact, in the Himalayan context, the association of religion with ecosystem management is interwoven in the symbolic network of the Himalayan communities [13, 14]. Conversion of forest land into non-forest activity is one of the major threats to the ecosystem functioning and biodiversity conservation [15]. Ecologists worldwide are concerned about the habitats, which are fragmented by human activity, because these urgently need extensive study to preserve their ecology and biodiversity with prioritization of internationally collaborative research studies. The need for preservation lies in the value of the component of diversity, which includes the direct benefits arising from the conservation of those components *viz.*, ecosystems services, biological resources and social benefits [16].

According to the Fourth Global Environment Outlook (2008), the following is described: “The biodiversity also incorporates human cultural diversity, which can be affected by the same drivers as biodiversity, and which has impacts on the diversity of genes other species and ecosystems” [17]. Since there is an intimate relationship between two kinds of diversity, it should come as no surprise that of all the new terms and concepts that have emerged in recent years, the concept of ‘bio-cultural diversity’ is the one gaining wide acceptance, revealing clearly the complex linkages of human culture and nature. One such association is between linguistic diversity and biodiversity. There are indeed remarkable overlaps between areas of biological mega-diversity, just as there is a high correlation between low cultural diversity and low biodiversity [18]. So the present investigation was taken to understand the attitude and effects of cultural-rich region towards the conservation and management practices of forests and utilization of resources.

Materials and methods

Study area

Reconnaissance field survey was carried out in different provinces of Garhwal Himalaya for the present study. Based on the reconnaissance and preliminary survey, five protected landscape/forests were selected for detailed study. The main criteria for the selection of forests were the conservation efforts by the local communities based on sacredness/association of deities, community conservation measures and beliefs associated with them. Other factors like size, vegetation and altitude were also taken into consideration. The selected sites were having status of reserve forest, community forest, or *Van Panchyat*. The present study was conducted in five selected protected forests *i.e.* Chanderbadni, Jameshwar, Ulkagari, Ansuiya Devi and Maroor, located in four districts of Garhwal Himalaya. Conservation practices and belief system was discussed with local inhabitants residing within and around the vicinity of these landscapes. A well-structured questionnaire was developed for formal and informal discussions with the communities. The questionnaire covered various aspects like belief system, deities worshiped, dependency and other management practices. Both genders (and mostly elder age classes) were involved in the discussions. Observations were also made personally and pertinent details were recorded in association with local communities at each site [19, 20].

Results

Taboos for conservation and management

Background information

The Chandrabadni Mountain (Siddha Peeth) on the border of tehsil Devaprayag and Pratapnagar is well known for the temple of Chandrabadni Devi. The goddess associated with the temple is Durga Mata Sita (wife of Lord Shiva and daughter of Daksha Prajapati), and is considered as one of the famous deities in Garhwal Himalaya. The area viewed from top of the temple is considered sacred and is having good influence of the deity. This temple is surrounded from all sides by dense oak forests, and considered as one of the most religious shrine. The myth behind the conservation is that when Sati, the wife of Shiva, gave up her life in the *yajna* started by her father and Shiva was carrying her body to Kailash, her torso fell over some places (Kunjapuri, Surkanda Devi and Chandrabadni), and are thus worshipped as Siddha Peeths. People believe that this goddess has been always there from the primeval period, and is always beneficial to people. There are some old statues and lots of iron *trishuls* (tridents) outside the temple. The journey to this temple can be carried out any time, but if done during *Navratra* of any month then it makes a difference. In the south of the temple, at about 3 km distance in the midst of dense forest, is located the temple of God Bhiarava, which is also known as one-legged Bhiarava. According to the old myths, the one-legged Bhiarava is present there as protector of Chandrabadni goddess, in mediation state. During the snowfall, the sign of footprints appear around the temple. The temple here is very small, and contains a *Shri Yantra* carved out on a flat stone instead of any idol. Traditionally, a cloth canopy is tied to the ceiling over this *Shri Yantra* once a year and the Brahmin priest doing this blind-folded.

Jagdambshwar temple (Shiv temple) is located in village Jamu/Ravigram in Ukhimat block of Rudraprayag district. This forest is situated near the village, 2km on motorable road, and be visited throughout the year. It is said that Shri Jagdambshwar saint worshiped Shiv at this place. His wife Reenuka was also with him and the stream flowing from the north of the temple is known as Reenuka. The Lord Shiva appeared before Jagdamshwar saint on this site, and therefore this is also known as Shiv temple. Along the Shiv temple, this forest encompasses other religious places such as Chandika Devi temple, Morkajad, Narsing Devta and Naketal. The belief for the conservation is that the source of water to this place is from Trijuginarayan, and all the goddess and gods from distant places (Kedarnath and Badrinath) come to this place to take holy bath. Before taking a bath, they have to cross the Morkajad (group of trees considered sacred) to reach Naketal. Naketal is situated at top of this forest and is believed to be home of Nag Devta.

According to old sayings, Ulkeshwari Devi had warned the people before Garhwal were occupied by *Gaurkhas*. This temple covers cluster of many villages. People of different castes and status reside in these villages, but there is a strong belief regarding this deity as there is no difference in the faith. The Ansuiya Devi landscape is situated in Dasoli block/Mandal range of district Chamoli. Temple is situated away from main road of Mandal on 5km of foot track, which is also *en route* to Rudre-Tung Himalaya. This landscape is considered as protected, because of presence of temples of some great saints like Ansuiya Devi temple, Attramuni ashram, Amdar Devta temple, and Dodga Devta. Maha Rishi Attri, who is one of the seven saints among great Maha rishies after Kashaf, Ustreey, Jagdambeshwar, Bharadwaj, Visha Mitra and Gautam. The temple of Ansuiya is famous as most of *puja*/worship is carried out therein. It is said that once Maha rishi Attri was very thirsty, Devi Ansuiya prayed to goddesses Ganga, and Ganga itself changed its direction and moved upwards towards Maharashi in the form of spring, which is known as Amrit Ganga, and the place where the waterfalls near the cave is known as Amrit Kund. According to Hindu mythology, on one day, wife of Brahmin named Kaushik showed her determined duty to save her husband's life from the curse given by

Mandakya muni, she did not allow the sun to come out for seven days, and the earth was in darkness by her action. The life on earth was not running normally and at last by the request of goddesses Ansuiya, the life was brought to normalcy. Temples of Gandiyal Devta, Bhairav Devta and Bhagwati Devi exist within these forested patches. In Gandiyal Devta temple, worship is offered twice a year, once before sowing of agricultural crops, and secondly during harvesting period. First harvested crops are offered to deity, whereas in Bhairav Devta temple worship is offered throughout the year. These three temples are situated on different corners of this forest, and are believed to be caretaker.



Fig. 1. Forest landscapes: a - Source of water (Nagtal) flowing through Jameshwar forest; b - Devotes offering *prashad* to make their wishes come true in Maroor temple, c - Significance of epitaph of Ansuiya Devi, d - Gandiyal devta temple in Maroor covered with red flags.

Gender, worship and community issues

Deities of both genders are worshiped in these landscapes, however people think feminine deities preside more as compared to male deities. In all the landscapes, there is no discrimination among genders. Both male and female groups were allowed to participate. However, people were of different opinions regarding the entering of women undergoing menstrual cycle. There are strict rules and regulations, to be followed during worship. The worship in Chanderbadni can be conducted only by the Brahmins of Pujar village. The other people can do other work like drum beating, cleaning and other works of temple. No restrictions have been imposed on cast and creed of people belongs to different communities.

Festivals and fairs

The fabric of cultural landscape of the Garhwal Himalaya is woven with the multi-racial elements of culture. The organization and celebration of fairs and festivals has preserved the traditional and socio-cultural heritage of the region to the great extent. *Melas* or festivals are organized in the month of April and October every year on the occasion of *Navratra*, where

people from adjacent villages celebrate the festival, and meetings are held for the conservation of forests and their sustainable management. These festivals have been effective in conservation of socio-culture heritage of the area. Festivals of Dahesara and Ram Navmi are celebrated by people around Ulkagari region, which is also a traditional practice to create awareness regarding conservation programmes. Two days fair in the month of December is celebrated as Ansuviya mela, during which Rath Doli from nearby Ghram Sabhas is taken from village temples to Ansuviya Devi temple. Taking the principal guardian deity out of the temple in a decorated doli is practiced in all these temples. People across Garhwal come over here too to celebrate the special prayers and worship is offered at Ansuviya Devi temple. A large fair is held in the month of December on the occasion of Duttatreya Jayanti. Thousands of pilgrims come here to worship the Goddess throughout the night with lamps ablaze in their hands.

Taboos, rituals and restrictions

The taboos and rituals associated with these sanctity landscapes has been one of the motivating factors for sustainable use of resources. Source of water in Jameshwar forest is from Trijuginarayan and all the goddess and gods from places like Kedarnath and Badrinath come to this place to have a bath. Before taking bath, they have to cross the Morkajad to reach Naketal. Naketal is situated at top of this forest, and is believed to be the home of Nag Devta. No spitting and construction of toilets is allowed nearby the Ansuviya temple. Normally, worshipers visiting these temples stop taking onion, garlic, and egg before a week. People also sometimes use to leave their slippers way behind in the fringes, and visit the temple with bare foot to make their wishes come true. In certain cases, people get their heads shaved to make ceremonial offerings to the god. Earlier people used to remove leathery items before entering these sacred landscapes. Killing of animals, resemble to Hindu gods/goddesses, is prohibited. In some landscapes, extraction of biomass is prohibited for one week to many years. Use of iron weapons like axes and skills, is prohibited for use of tree felling. Species like *Cedrus deodara*, *Prunus cerasoides* and *Celtis australis* are considered sacred in Hindu religion, and hence used for religious purposes only.

Resource utilization and Institutional setup

The studied protected and sacred landscapes are mostly administrated by forest department like rest of the groves in India. However, due to the presence of local inhibiting human population, they have raised community forests, administrated by them, and allow people to be intact with these landscapes as well. Green felling has been banned, and partial extraction of biomass in the form of dead wood, fallen trees and dry matter, is allowed from the forest floor around the temples. The awareness among villagers about the conservation is historical and social fencing and demarcations by red piece of cloth in the fringe areas are substitutive conservation tools to protect these forests. Agroforestry and social forestry practices have been adopted by villagers, by whom an intense anthropogenic pressure on forests and forest products is being reduced. Use of weapons makes deity unhappy, and has been stopped partially by the local inhabitants. Van Panchyat Committees in collaboration with forest department officials, regulations have also been setup for better management of pristine forests by the communities. At Maroor, the forest is opened in autumn season for collection of fodder only from Oak trees. For construction purpose, Rs. 150 has to be deposited in Panchyat for cutting down of one tree of *Pinus roxburghii* with prior permission. Both male and female groups are involved decision making processes and management issues.

Present status and threats

The religion of communities in Garhwal has been influenced by the migration of various ethnological groups during different periods in past. Human activities such as collection of

fuelwood, fodder, timber for construction, and cattle grazing affect the ecological status of landscapes, whereas developmental activities like road construction, dam establishment and other income generating activities may force younger generation to ponder, that such landscapes were only superstitious. Present observations confirm that traditional rituals and taboos are respected by older generation, whereas younger generation is migrating to earn their livelihood activities. Fading traditional knowledge from older to younger generation may no longer preserve the traditional heritage of knowledge.

Discussion

Forests play an important role in maintaining the ecological balance besides fulfilling the basic needs of rural people and other national requirements. It is a well known fact that forests are being depleted and degraded due to unprecedented growth of human population and ever-increasing the basic needs and other developmental activities [21]. Rapid global biodiversity loss is an issue of critical concern, with approximately 5,000 species of animals and 25,000 species of plants, currently listed by CITES (2003) as endangered, threatened, or at risk of over-exploitation. The inclusion of local people's needs and interests in conservation planning is increasingly accepted as essential, both to promote the well-being of human populations, and to ensure that biodiversity and conservation needs are met in the long-term [22].

Recognition of the importance of conservation issues has grown enormously within the religious communities in recent years, with statement of support coming from "mainstream faiths" [23]. The traditions persist, for instance in Hinduism, and the emphasis on the Virgin Mary in the orthodox and catholic Christian faiths, has also been linked to the Mother Goddess [24] or faiths emanating from Asia regarding nature as sacred [25]. Institutions are consistently devised by humans that structure human interaction [26]. Informal institutions are those not dependent on the state for enforcement [27] and include taboos and social norms. Most conservation biologists, for example would include non-use values, such as spiritual and cultural values, in their reasons for conserving biodiversity [28].

In the present study, the ownership and management of these forests was carried out either by forest department or Van Panchyat committees or other village level informal institutions. In most of the cases, dependent communities do not follow the enforced laws and regulations by the state or central government, but conservation is done on the basis of social norms, faiths and other taboos associated with these forests. Taboos and faiths linked to these landscapes have been in existence since long ago, and the present communities have belief in the history and taboos in the form of stories. These forests are dedicated to some famous and powerful deities like Nagraj Devta, Ansuiya Devi, Attarmani Rishi and Ulkeshwari Devi, whose description in the Hindu mythology is taken with lot of respect. The myths behind the conservation of these forests have been described in different stories from time to time and people are emotionally attached to these stories and form the base of their present conservation strategy.

It is difficult to uncover the origins of taboos, because those who made them are long dead. Nevertheless there are collected many stories about the origin of species specific taboos, none of which appear to have natural resource management ethic behind them [29]. Celebration of different festivals and offering of worship within these landscapes has a long history of preserving the traditional cultural knowledge of the region, and are representing true socio-culture heritage of the region/state. No use of weapons, restrictions to pregnant women, and ban on spitting and making of toilets around the core zones of these forests has restricted the entry to the vulgar ideas. Demarcation around the boundaries by red flags or statues of gods or goddesses have been erected in these forests to provide a place to put votive offerings which ultimately give protection to these forests in the form of social conservation. Sharing stories that make use of overlaps with indigenous beliefs may, therefore, be a valuable approach in

conservation education and wider conservation communication [31]. Sacred natural sites occur in protected areas throughout the world and are not confined to one faith, culture or levels of economic development. Sacred tree species like *Ficus spp.* and *Prunus cerosoides* are also worshipped in the studied landscapes as statues of gods or goddesses. Building of alternative resources like formation of communal forests or Van Panchyats around these sites can result in increasing the life span of these forests against the present external forces.

Conclusions

The present study suggests that mounting pressure of population on natural resources like forests in Garhwal Himalaya can be reduced by bringing local communities together with support of forest department. More forested areas should be brought under the traditional conservation system like Van Panchyat and sacredness. These measures are chief and sustainable conservation can be achieved. The entire area is religious and both male and female deities have great influence in lives of local communities which indirectly influences the conservation practices. Traditional celebrations of fairs and festivals are keeping intact the cultural heritage of the region.

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