
CHANGING PERSPECTIVES OF LOCAL COMMUNITY THREATENS SACRED GROOVES

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Abstract

The sacred groove locally known as Devrai are patches of ancient forest preserved by dedicating to the local deities or tree spirit. They are the great repositories of medicinal plants, fruits, fodder, fuel and wood. Deep faiths, beliefs and socio-cultural taboos embedded in the culture of local communities has protected them since many centuries. This paper attempts to find out awareness of local people about sacred grooves ecosystem services provided by Kudavale devrai from Dapoli taluka of Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra state and also outlines whether any changes in perspective of local people gradually threatens this sacred groove or not. The study is based on field visits, survey method and interaction with local people. The study concludes that local people neglect the ecosystem services provided by Kudavale devrai due to detachment. Rather than being grateful to the nature, people are interested in celebrating fairs-festivals and further damaging Kudavale devrai. This necessitates environmental education of masses and inculcating basic environmental ethics and values among new generations.

Introduction

In Maharashtra state of India, the sacred grooves are known as *Devrai* or *Devrahati*. Dev means God and Rai means forest. The meaning of Devrahati is the abode (rahati) of God (Dev). Such sacred grooves are common property resources of entire village or habitat, irrespective of ownership with state machinery. These sacred grooves are the tract of virgin forests that are protected traditionally by the generations and protect rich biodiversity. They are the great repositories of medicinal plants, fruits, fodder, fuel and wood. Sacred groove are patches of forest preserved by dedicating to the local deities or tree spirit. Hence people believed that any kind of disturbance would offend the local deity, causing diseases, natural calamities, or failure of crops. In some forests, even the dry foliage, twigs and fallen fruits were not allowed to be touched. This faith, beliefs

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and socio-cultural taboos have protected sacred grooves for generations together. Sacred groove ranges from a few square meters to several hectares. They are the relics of evergreen forest which once existed in the locality and later lost due to anthropogenic interferences.

Literature Review

Lot of interesting ethno-botanical studies were conducted by Gadgil and Vartak (1976) with respect to sacred grooves in Maharashtra state. Patil Vinayak (2011) had recorded 10 rare and threatened plants and 29 endemic plants from the 11 sacred grooves of Dapoli taluka. Further he mentions that sacred grooves of Dapoli hold rich biodiversity of rare, threatened and endemic plant species. Ghalame (2013) studied 281 plant species in the ethno-medico-botanical explorations in sacred grooves of Dapoli taluka, where he had recorded 19 threatened and 36 endemic plant species. Sacred grooves of Dapoli Taluka have been reported to hold important and rare floristic elements like *Entada scandens*, *Antiaristoxicaria*, *Saracaasoca* (locally rare) and also threatened species like *Cryptocoryne cognate* (Ghalme 2013, Patil 2016). As per the records of the revenue department, Dapoli taluka 110 sacred groves (Patil, 2016). while Raskar Shivaji (2015) has recorded 132 devrais from Dapoli taluka. They range in size from 0.05 to 40 ha.

Need For the Study

South Konkan region of Maharashtra state of India is located at the west of Western Ghats. The Western Ghats is known as one of the biological hotspots of world. In the region, Ratnagiri district possess the second highest number of sacred grooves followed by Sindhudurg district. In spite of strong religious beliefs, the sacred grooves are decreasing with the onslaught of modernization (John, 1997). Many devrai are facing threats due competition with non-forest land-use, erosion of traditional values, loss of beliefs due to modern education and changing value system. Anthropogenic pressures like various developmental activities, over exploitation of resources, modernization, urbanization and increase in human population has led to the destruction of natural sites. The literature review brought to the notice that, Kudavale devrai is still well maintained and one of the largest devrai (46 hectares) from Dapoli taluka. This

motivated me to undertake the study of Kudavale devrai to identify the ecosystem services provided by it and to study the perception of the local people regarding devrai. This paper therefore, attempts to assess the level of awareness of local people about ecosystem services provided by Kudavale devrai from Dapoli taluka and also outlines whether any changes in perspective of local people is gradually threatening this sacred grove or not.

In spite of religious beliefs, sacred groves are decreasing with the onslaught of modernization (John, 1997). Thus, the Bodos have culturally varied and rich materials that warrant systematic research based on the direct fieldwork.

This traditional and indigenous knowledge and ecological prudence underlying genetic conservation may get lost forever unless they are recognized and documented (Swaminathan, 1995). Anthropogenic pressures like various developmental activities, over exploitation of resources, modernization, urbanization and increase in human population has lead to the destruction of natural sites. Thus viable steps should be undertaken for sustaining their economic condition and conservation of sacred groves followed by proper legislative support.

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out awareness level of local people about significance of Kudawale devrai from Dapoli Taluka,
2. To study if any change in the perception of local people regarding Kudawale devrai To identify the impact of changed perspective if any on Kudawale devrai

Study Area Kudavale Village (Dapoli)

The geographical location of Kudavale devrai is 17° 51' 40.8"N and 73° 14' 37.4" E. Kudavale village is located from the distance of 17 kms from Dapoli taluka of Ratnagiri district. The village is made of 380 households with eleven *wadis* (i.e., hamlets) namely Adiwasiwadi, Baudhwadi, Teliwadi, Yadavwadi, Devkholwadi, Katkarwadi, Valjaiwadi, Sutarwadi, Bhoiwadi, Govindnagar, Kadamwadi. The Kudavale devrai is located around 500 m distance from the core settlement of Kudavale (Gavthan) village. It shelters moist evergreen forest.

Research Methodology

Literature review was undertaken to find out research gap. Each devrai represents unique ecosystem with different biodiversity, micro- climate, rituals performs and the causes of threats. Therefore, to study changing perspectives of local people of Kudavale village and to give justice to the study, qualitative approach of case study was employed. Research methodology includes field visits, photographs, interaction with local stakeholders and questionnaire survey to understand the changing perspective of local people. Questionnaire was used as the tool. The focus group consist of 50plus years age group adults who have witnessed the changes in Devrai. Around 35 villagers from Kudavale village were interviewed through questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part comprises questions regarding awareness about Ecosystem services provided by Kudavale devrai and the second part consists of questions regarding changes in the perspective of local people about Kudavale devrai.

Analysis of Questionnaire

Part A- Ecosystem Services Provided by Kudavale Devrai

Around 57 percent respondent replied that this devrai provides us fresh air and sufficient rainfall while 53 percent respondent remained indifferent. Field visit to Kudavale devrai confirmed this fact as it sheltered many trees such as *Beheda* (*Terminalia bellirica*) and *Pipari* (*Ficus amplissima*) which are known for high level of carbon sequestration. Around 92 percent respondent admitted that prosperity of their village depends upon perennial rivulet that originates from devrai and then meets to River Bharaja. Villagers have brought water of this river to by using natural slope of the terrain. Bhairidevi, Valjai are the deities of the Kudavale devrai. Around 15 percent respondent informed that certain rare medicinal plants are found only in Kudavale devrai which they still use for healing purposes such as *Garambi* (*Entada rheedei*) is used on snake bite, *Kal-lavi* (*Gloriosa superba*) is used for provoking labour pains to the expecting mother. Nearly 35 percent feel that new generation even cannot identify many species and prefer to go for allopathy treatment than going to folk healers which were using these medicinal plants sustainably.

Part B- Changes in the perspective of local people about Kudavale devrai.

Around 52 percent respondent informed that, Earlier devrai was owned by entire village hence everybody was more concerned about its conservation status. But transforming ownership to the government department from villagers had reduced the sense of responsibilities of the villagers. Now people call it as *Sarkari* Jungle. Nearly 48 percent respondent said that modern generation is not much interested in observing these social taboos. Around 97 percent respondent replied that earlier there were strict restrictions in entering in devrai for collection of timber & non timber products and now there is no strict restrictions in entering in devrai for collection of timber & non timber products. Nearly 85 percent said that there was strict ban on grazing activities but now some villagers take their cattle to graze nearby or sometimes in Devrai. Around 52 percent respondent answered that earlier there was strict ban on logging activities but compared to earlier there is no strict ban on logging activities. One has to take permission from the authority with valid reason Around 79 percent replied that people were not allowed to go near rivulet with shoes or chappals, but now people wear shoes and chappal while going near rivulet Approximately 68 percent argued that there was no well-built temple and the deities were place under the tree in open area but few years back temple was built for worshipping Bhairidevi amidst Kudval devrai Nearly 90 percent respondent replied that local people had right to use water from rivulet flowing from Kudawale devrai and 10 percent said they do not know. Almost all replied that there was total ban on hunting animal from Kudavale devrai and now they cannot comment as not aware About 62 percent replied that earlier villagers were largely visiting devrai at the time of festivals and social gatherings only and now anybody can visit devrai at any time when they wish to collect non timber products Around 92 percent respondent informed that only Hindus were allowed to enter in Devrai to worship deities and now there are no strict restrictions on the entry of villagers belongs to any caste or religion.

Observations and Discussion

Few decades ago, villagers had intimate bonds with nature and they were highly depended on nature for satisfying their basic needs like food, water, fodder, medicines, fuel from nature. Local folk healers had good knowledge of

medicinal plants found in devrai. But nowadays due to modernization, people prefer allopathy medicines than ayurvedic medicines. Hence new generation of folk healers is not much interested in *jadibuti* and had lost the knowledge of many indigenous medicinal plants. Now the dependence of local people is gradually reducing on natural resources. Hence, they do not care much natural resources. Development projects such as construction of pathway through devrai had posed moderate level damage to the well maintained Kudavale devrai. Due to construction of pathway. Devrai had been fragmented into two parts. This had resulted into fragmentation of habitat in Kudavale devrai. The damage is further observed in terms of removal of biomass due to logging. Similarly, Sanskritization in terms of building large decorative temple for deities from devrai which were earlier established under tree in an open environment had also destroyed certain part of Kudavale devrai. The chief deity of the sacred grove is *Bhairi Jogeshwari* alongwith *Kshtrepal* and Maruti each having a separate temple. In addition, *Valjai devi* is another deity with good standing among local people but located at the edge of the SG and without any proper temple. The most severe damage has been seen through increased tourism activities during the fairs and festivals observed in Kudavale devrai. Large number of people from urban areas visit to this devrai to perform certain religious rites and rituals. This violates the carrying capacity of Kudavale devrai and most of them do not have much attachment but are blindly following the tradition. Shift in belief due to staying away from village, impact of modern education is also responsible for damaging Kudavale devrai.

Conclusion

It should also be noted that the most well- known and the large size Kudavale sacred grooves are also facing threats to its conservation status due to changes in the set of beliefs, modern education, weakening of emotional bonds of migrant family members to the nearby cities. Now local people considered Kudavale sacred groove is the responsibility of forest department and restricted themselves to festivals and rituals required to perform at temple. The increased popularity of deity attracts the annual gathering of the migrants in the form of religious tourism who has very less sense of responsibility and accountability. To

mitigate this problem awareness about devrai ecosystem, strict implementation of laws and the most important inculcating love towards nature in new generation is required.

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