



A brief study of the sacred groves of Jharkhand and their non-brahmin priests

Subhashis Das

Researcher, St. Columba's College Hazaribagh, Ranchi University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India

Abstract

Utterance of the term 'temple' evokes in our mental canvas a precise structure of a building belonging to the Hindu, Jaina, Buddhist or the Sikh etc faith. But prior to the emergence of classical religions that had prompted humanity to building imposing structures of worship and pray, humankind worshipped in caves, rivers, waterholes, stones, megaliths, trees and sacred groves which were and still are their temples since hoary antiquity. Groves, which are being worshipped since times immemorial are a cluster of trees where gods, goddesses, spirits are believed to reside. No one really knows for sure when and how humanity embarked in the veneration of trees and groves. We may trace the worship of trees possibly both to the fecundity cult of hoary times when trees were held as deities of fertility (as much later in India we find the concept of *salabhanjika*) and to the trepidation of forests owing to the prevailing belief in spirits; both malevolent and benevolent who are believed to dwell in jungles and trees, who rescued mankind in times of disease and trouble, if men were able to win the spirits' favours. This paper is a study of the various grove temples of the state of Jharkhand; created or worshipped by different communities and tribes. The paper also discusses the priests or shamans who in non Sanskritic and non Brahmanical manner conduct the rituals for votary in these grove temples.

Keywords: sarna, mandar, gamhel, megaliths, mundas, santals, oraons, asurs, hos

Introduction

Ritualistic oblations in sacred groves are still performed by numerous tribal and Hindu communities and even by people who have not completely deserted their aboriginal way of worship neither have they wholly adopted the Hindu mode of praying. These latter set of people who are colossal in number across the country worship and celebrate both tribal and Hindu deities and festivals respectively including a few of their own, adopt the non Brahmanical mode of worship by appointing non brahmanical priests; finding no apposite word I prefer calling them, paganistic.

Dubbed with different names one can still view these grove temples in much of the kaleidoscopic landscape of India. In the Malabar Coast of Kerala sacred groves are called *kavu*. Queerly the state has few sacred groves called *sarpakavus* that are dedicated to snakes^[1]. The biggest grove in Kerala being in the Ernakulam district is called *iringole*. Kerala is believed to house about 2000 sacred groves. In Maharashtra such groves are called *dev rahati*. In the Western Ghats region of Pune, Raigarh, Ratnagiri and Kolhapur districts there are about 250 sacred groves while the entire state comprises of about 1600 groves. In Southern Western Ghats, there is a five hectare patch of a sacred grove called *dhuprahat*^[2]. In the Mewar, Ajmer, Jaisalmer and Alwar regions of Rajasthan sacred groves have a variety of names as *vani*, *kenkri*, *oran* and *shamlat deh* respectively. Rajasthan holds about 25000 *orans*, among which the largest is in the Bhadariya district of Jaisalmer which is spread to an area of about 15000 hectares. Around the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya these sacred groves are called *law kynthangs* or *lyngdohs*^[3]. Grove temples in Odisha are known as jahera and *thakuramma*.

The *Wikipedia* cites that in and around Delhi the Gurjars have their sacred groves called *mangar vani*. There are about 691 sacred groves in Andhra Pradesh known as *pavitraskhetraalu*^[4]. The sacred groves in Bengal amounts to about 670 in number and are termed as *garamthan*, *harithan*, *santhalburithan* and *sabitrithan*^[5]. Manipuri sacred groves are called *Uumanglai*, *mauhak* and *gamkhap*. The list is indeed endless.

The Hindu sacred corpus mention about four types of sacred groves called *panchvati*, *sreevan*, *tapovan* and *mahavan*. Mention of sacred groves can be found in a few ancient Sanskrit texts as that in *Vrikshayurveda* and even in Kalidasa's *Vikramuurvashiya*. The Jaina, Buddhists and even the Tamil Sangam literature too mention these groves.

Maya Devi gave birth to Gautam Buddha in the sacred *saal* (*shorea robusta*) grove of Lumbini. After his manifestation into the Buddha he first sermonised in the Deer Park in Sarnath which too was a grove. During his meandering in the course of preaching his *dhamma* the Buddha is believed to have resided in several groves or *vanas* as Venuvana in Rajgir and Jethavana in Shravasti in Kosala. Buddha resorted to his *mahaparinirvana* in the sacred *saal* grove of the Mallas in Kusinara. Sacred groves are not only associated with ritualistic worship but several communities use these temples during their respective religious festivals. Such groves are also hotspots of biodiversity as these are also haven to numerous animals, birds, insects and many rare species of herbal plants, wild flowers and other sort of flora.

Sacred Groves of Jharkhand

Jharkhand houses several sacred sites in which the primary

ones are the megaliths of the tribals known in the local tribal *austriac* vernacular as *hargarhi*, *birdiri*, *sasandiri*, *jangarha* or *jaanbagha et al* [6]. The other sacred spots are waterholes and water bodies called *chuiyaan* and *dariya* respectively, caves called *kho*, hills known as *tongri* and/or *buru* etc and of course the sacred groves that are interspersed all over the state and are called with a variety of names which we would discuss ahead.

Jharkhand possesses numerous sacred groves known with names as varied as *sarna*, *gamhel*, *mandar*, *ailware*, *chuto kuria*, *jaher than* etc; all according to the trees in them and the tribes, communities and religious groups that worship in there. The prevailing belief among the communities and the tribes that worship in the different groves is that the gods, goddesses, spirits (*could also be of the ancestors*), *bhuts*, or the benign *bongas* that dwell in them; they all protect them and their families, cattle, their agriculture and villages from any looming menace.

The priests or the shamans in Jharkhand are known as *bhakats*, *bhaktins*, *mati*, *naeke* and *pahaans* etc and they all conform to family lineages. One needs to note that they are not Brahmins; as priests in India are commonly thought to be but are *adivasis* or *dalits* in origin. I have observed that the main priests of the sacred grove temples in Jharkhand are called *pahaans*.

Sarna (Plate 1)

Sarnas found in abundance in the central and the southern parts of the state are temple groves of the Munda, Oraon, Asur, Baiga and Ho etc tribes. Much akin to *panchwati* of the Hindus, a *sarna* too should house at least five trees. Only difference is that these five trees in a *sarna* should be *saal* also known as *sarjhoum* (*shorea robusta*). *Saal*, the holiest of the trees of the *adivasis* is not sacred to the Hindus as for them it is the *vat* or the *peepal et al*. Many anthropologists believe that the *proto austroloid* Mundas were the first to arrive in the region of Jharkhand hence claiming their ownership of the land known as *khunkatti* [7]. This claim is of course shunned by the *proto austroloid* Asurs who believe that it were they who had arrived in Jharkhand prior to the Mundas as the latter had chased them into this land. The Mundas on the other hand assert that they having arrived here first, cleared the woods and left a cluster of the primitive forest as a memory and began worshipping it which they named it as their *sarna*. Discussing grove worship among the tribes, late D.B.Kisku, the noted author and an authoritative scholar of tribal history and Santal studies like most other tribal *gurus* assert that the various mythical homelands of *Hihiri Pirpi*, *Azob garh* and *Hirapur* of the different *adivasis* were located outside India as in Sumeria or Chaldea etc. Kisku affirms that it was in here that the cult of *sarna* and other groves were prevalent. It was also here that they worshipped Goddesses *Ana* or *Anu* inside their respective sacred grove temples. Therefore the term *sarna* may have stemmed from the confluence of two words, of *sar* or the *sal* trees and of that of Goddess *Ana* [8]. During their migration into India the *proto austroloid* people lugged with them their cult of *sarna* and of other groves along with several of their rituals and their megalith building custom [9]. Whether Kisku is correct in regards to *sarna* or not is difficult to confirm but most of the *adivasis* in Jharkhand do believe

that their original homeland was indeed outside India in countries like Sumeria, Chaldea etc [10]. Furthermore various Mundari tribes regard their *sarnas* to be female entities or Goddesses. Several *adivasis* believe that in their *sarnas* reside their *gram ditis* or the Tutelary Goddess of their village. The *adivasis* worship in these groves even during their various festivals as *Sarhul Karma* etc. Ritualistic worshipping of their ancestors is also conducted here. The priests in *sarnas* called *pahans* are they are of the Asurs, Mundas, Oraons or even Ganju (*Ganjus however are regarded as a Hinduised community in government records of Bihar and Jharkhand*) etc tribes.



Plate 1: *Sarna* in Rajhar. Note that a *sarna* apart from few other trees would consist of at least five *saal* trees, as these trees are sacred to the *adivasis*.

Mandar or Madar (Plate 2)

The non-tribal paganistic peasants and the Hindus worship in these sacred grove temples which they call *mandar* or *mandar* that exist in many villages of Central Jharkhand. The term *mandar* could have its origin in the Sanskrit word *mandir* or vice versa. A unique aspect of *mandar* is that most of these groves have names and they are suffixed either with a “*gosaiwn*” or a “*baba*”. To exemplify I have cited two of such groves of which one is called the *Daroga Gosaiwn* (Plate 2) and the other, *Tongri Baba* (Plate 3). Being non-tribal paganistic/Hindu in origin, a *mandar* unlike a *sarna* may not comprise only *saal* trees but also *vat*, *peepal*, *simul et al* which are considered sacred to the Hindus; however similar to that of the *adivasis* their priests too are called *pahaans* and they are not Brahmins neither *adivasis* but people belonging to the lower communities as *Bhuiyaans*, *Ganjus*, *Chamaars et al*. The person wanting his wishes be fulfilled silently conveys to the gods (*called deta*)/*bhuts*/*bongas* or the benevolent spirits (*could even be of the ancestors*) residing in the groves that they would sacrifice a cock and would also offer a bottle of hooch to them if they would fulfil their heart’s desire. The practice is known commonly as *gachati* or *manowti*. If by chance the wishes get granted, then the adherent employs *pahaans* to conduct the *gachati/manowti* rites to the spirits or the goddess of the grove. During their service, the *pahaan* neither utters any Sanskrit mantras nor performs any Brahmanical ritual. Their custom of worship is purely

animistic by nature. As pledged by the celebrant, he/she brings with them the offerings of a cock, local hooch, rice and a few other ingredients which they had sworn to the spirits or the *deta* of the grove. The *pahaan* makes the cock take a sip of the hooch and thereafter he feeds it a few grains of rice and other items. Silently mumbling some magical lines he sacrifices the fowl by cutting its throat little by little with a knife (*I have seen one even use a razor blade*) and not by a “*jhatka*” stroke as normally done by Hindus. He offers the sacrificed cock, a bottle of the local hooch, a little rice and other ingredients to propitiate the spirits or the *deta* of the *mandar* while murmuring his lines noiselessly; all part of the “*gachati/manowti*” custom (Plate 4). Apart from the personal *gachatti* rites the *asadiya pujas* in the *asadh* months of Jun/July too are conducted here by the *pahaans*.



Plate 2: A Mandar. The author and his son sits inside a large mandar called Daroga Gosaiwn. Please note in this photograph that the mandar does not house saal trees as in a tribal sarna but comprises trees as “vat”, “peepal” etc; trees sacred only to Hindus.



Plate 3: A *pahaan* sits in the sacred platform of a mandar grove called the Tongri Baba. Sadly today the mandar has a very few trees left. The woman in red is an offerer who has come for a “*gachati*”.



Plate 4: A “*gachati*” in progress inside the mandar temple grove of Barasi. This little fellow is the son of the *pahaan* of this mandar (who is also a *pahaan* himself) is conducting the “*gachati*” ritual by sacrificing a cock. The bottle contains liquor and the paper “*thonga*” has rice. While the adherent who has pledged the “*gachati*” looks on.

Gamhel

Typical to Chatra and its neighbouring districts *gamhels* are sacred groves that are non-tribal in origin. Nothing could be deciphered in regards to the etymology of the term *gamhel*. The terminology of *gamhel* is in close proximity with the *gamhar* tree but whether or not the both are connected, is difficult to say. I was unable to spot *saal* trees in *gamhels* but found the preponderance of trees sacred to the Hindus as the *peepal*, *jamun*, *neem*, *simar* and *vat* etc in them. What difference is there between the *gamhel* and *mandar* groves is still not established. Much in the fashion of ritualistic oblations in a *mandar*, the *asadiya puja* too is conducted during months of June/July and even personal *gachatti* rituals are conducted in regular manner in such *gamhels*.

Jaher than (Plate 5)

JaherThans are temple groves of the Santal tribe. These sacred groves along with the *majhi thans* are found in profusion in Purulia and Santal Parganas as the Santals had arrived there about a few hundred years ago from Hazaribagh. Numerous *Jaher* and *majhi thans* can also be observed both in the Hazaribagh and Giridh districts; an evidence of their stay there prior to their migration to *Saatbhum* or Purulia and subsequently to the Santal Parganas.

Majhi than, an open air temple characteristic to the Santal tribe would comprise of a thick *saal* log dug into a square shaped elevated platform can be seen widely today in the Santal Parganas and Purulia. In plenty of Hindu villages in and around Hazaribagh, Chatra and Giridih districts one can still perceive the *jaher* and *majhi thans* although there are no Santals left there today. Such a phenomenon lends credence to the incident of the prolonged stay of the Santal tribals in these regions as mentioned in their folklore; they left behind these *thans* while migrating to Purulia and Santal Parganas. However there are several villages in the aforementioned

districts where there is still a dominance of this tribe where one can still see the *majhi and jaher thans*. Similar to that of a *sarna*, a Santali *jaher than* grove temple also comprises of at least five *saal* trees.

According to Kisku ^[8] the term *jaher than* is derived from the confluence two tribal *austric* words of *jaher* and that of *than*; *jaher* being their Goddess *Jaher Era/Ayo or Budhi* while *than* is suggestive of *sthan* or a place. Therefore *jaher than* means the place where the Goddess *Jaher Era, Ayo or Budhi* dwells, in other words *jaher than* is the abode of the Goddess *Jaher Era, Ayo or Budhi*. The Vishnu Purana however mentions that Goddess Era to be one of the wives of the sage Kassyapa ^[9]; wonder if this was an attempt to Hinduise the Santali deity. The Santal tribe celebrates their various festivals of *baha, salui, karma, sohrai, jaher dangir* etc in the *jaher than* grove. Many a times even regular ceremonies as marriage, naming of children and even death rituals too are conducted in the *jaher than* grove temple. The priest in the *jaher than* is not a *pahaan* as in central and southern Jharkhand but a *naeke*.



Source: <http://india-portrayed.blogspot.com/>

Plate 5: A Jaher than of the Santals.

Ailware and Chuto Kuria

Both the *ailwares* and *chuto kurias* are sacred groves of the *Mal* and the *Kumarbhag Pahadiyas* in the Godda sub-division of the Santal Parganas. The rituals conducted by the *pahans* or the *naikes* in these groves are more or less similar in nature as that of in a *Jaher than*.

Megaliths in Sacred Groves (Plate 6)

I have discovered several megalithic burials both inside *sarnas* and *mandars* in the Chatra district and in the border regions of the neighbouring districts of Palamau, Latehar and Hazaribagh. I am however yet to see megaliths within a *gamhel* and a *Jaher Than*. I would be happy if any reader would contact me for two reasons, firstly if they ever come across a megalithic site within a *gamhel* or a *jaher than* and secondly if they are aware of sacred groves in the state other than the type mentioned in this paper. Megaliths inside sacred groves are also found in the North- Eastern states of India. The megalithic "*hargarhis*" of the *adivasis* that are inside the *sarnas* and the *mandars* are indeed older. The trees for the grove may presumably have been planted within the

megalithic site much afterwards. However, standing at the middle of such a site one gets the impression that the megalithic burials were possibly a later implantation within The groves; this I suppose is a flawed understanding as it surely is the other way round. The trees were indeed a later inclusion in an earlier set of megalithic burials. I however do not have an explanation as to why the ancients carried out such a perplexing phenomenon of mixing ancient megaliths with groves.



Plate 6: A sarna in Banjha that contains a large megalithic site within it.

Threats to Sacred Groves (Plate 7)

Similar to that of the megaliths, the sacred groves which are significant spots of biodiversity too are a priceless heritage of our nation that should be preserved for the posterity. Sadly the Central Government barely has any rules laid down to preserve these grove temples as they have done for the archaeological heritages of our country. Sacred groves are flimsily protected under the Forest Act. Nevertheless, the Jharkhand State Government has come up with a *gherabandi* scheme to protect the *sarnas* of the tribals by erecting boundary walls around them. This however has sparked a debate as a few tribal groups consider this to be a ploy to impose other religions on them after including the *sarna* land into the government land banks ^[10]. Many tribals do not want sacred groves be associated with reserved forests. This ancient traditions of not permitting anyone to enter, indulge into logging, hunting or even breaking a trifle twig from a tree in such sacred groves and the fear of the spirits/*bongas/bhuts* in them has kept these temples alive for centuries. We should be proud that India is still in the possession of such an amazing heritage of sacred groves that consist of such a fascinating and diverse collection of flora and fauna and a heterogeneous convention of worship. But today respect for these sacred groves having disappeared, their existence are threatened. For instance take a look at the *mandar* of Tongri Baba (Plate 7)); stone mining has apparently endangered this major sacred grove. Several trees in the grove have withered and whatever trees that are left here appear so unhealthy. Sadly, much of the populace of the nation are unaware of this major heritage. Whenever the talk of a temple arises everyone envisages a customary Hindu, Jaina, Buddhist or a Sikh worshipping

structural design. That even a grove is also a temple does not come to their mind; they of course cannot be blamed for such an incorrect perception, for sacred groves and megaliths have not been described to us as one.



Plate 7: Stone quarrying is threatening this sacred mandar grove temple; the trees too look so unhealthy.

References

1. Jayarajan M. Sacred Groves of North Malabar. Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, 2009.
2. Gadgil M. Sacred Groves; an Ancient Tradition of Nature Conservation. Scientific American 2018.
3. Editor: Nalini Pant. Contemporary India. Ncert, 2003.
4. Kailash C Malhotra, Yogesh Gokhale, Sudipto Chatterjee, Sanjeev Srivastava. Cultural and Ecological Dimensions of Sacred Groves in India. Indian National Science Academy, New Delhi, and Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal, 2001.
5. Ram Kumar Bhakat. Socio-religious and ecological perspective of a sacred grove from Midnapore district, West Bengal, Science and Culture (Sci. Cult.), 2003.
6. Das Subhashis. Unknown Civilization of Prehistoric India. Kaveri Books, New Delhi, 2014.
7. Banerjee Mangovinda, an Historical Outline of Pre-British Chotanagpur. The education Press. Ranchi, 1993.
8. Kisku DB. The Santals and their Ancestors, Career Press, Dumka, 2000.
9. Das Subhashis, The Archaeoastronomy of a few Megalithic Sites of Jharkhand. Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2019.
10. Kisku Guru B. Kherwal Hoponkoak Sirjon Kahini (Traditional SantaL Story of creation and Human Development. Journal of the Asiatic Society Kolkata, 2003, 45(2).
11. Vishnu Purana. 12th Adhaya 124-125.
12. <https://india.mongabay.com/2019/12/protecting-sarna-jharkhands-groves-of-faith/>