



# THE ROLE OF SACRED GROVES IN SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMICAL LIVES OF GOND, KOLAM AND PRADHAN OF GONDWANA REGION IN MAHARASHTRA

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**Abstract:** This research paper explores the roles of sacred groves, trees and species in the lives of the Gond, Kolam and Pradhan communities of the Gondwana region of the Maharashtra state. Sacred groves have paved way to the tribal culture growth. Sacred Groves not only play vital role in the lives of tribals especially Gonds, Kolam and Pradhan but it has culturally bound these communities together. Nature and culture has significantly evolved over the period time. But as the time goes, many extraneous factors has affected the nature in terms of various political and economical changes, it can be seen that how it has negatively affected the nature and at the same time culture of tribals. There is an attempt to understand the sacred groves in terms of tribal culture, its major role in their lives. Thus, it is need to explore and documents the roles of sacred groves, trees and species in the socio-cultural and economical life of the local tribal communities.

**Keywords:** Sacred Groves, Socio-culture, Economical, Change & Tribe)

## INTRODUCTION

Sacred groves are known for its potential to sustainably use various forest resources. The major feature of these sacred grows are they encompasses

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varieties of plants, climbers, trees, shrubs etc., it also ensures various animal landraces. In fact, India a large diverse country covers 2.4 per cent of the world's land area, entails 7 to 8 per cent of all recorded species, including above 45 thousand species of plants and 91 thousand species of animals. It is also one of the twelve primary centers of origin of cultivated plants and domesticated animals (MoEF, 2014). Forest resources, such as trees, land, waterbodies these all are considered to be sacred for tribals in fact it also has a cultural significance for them in their everyday life (Khan *et al.*, 2008). Tribals communities have traditionally been using various forest resources, in a sustainable way, for their day-to-day requirements i.e. food, firewood, medicines, fodder, honey etc. In fact, using local resources in a sustainable way is a well-balanced practice of community led resource management as well as it also contributes in a biodiversity conservation of the forest resources such as medicinal plants as well (Behera *et al.* 2015). Similarly, sacred groves have been preserving India's rich religious and socio-cultural heritage of biodiversity since ancient times because of their significance (Ray and Ramchandra, 2010). They serve as a link between humans and nature. These groves enhance soil quality, restore water resources, and play a crucial role in conserving biodiversity by supporting plants and animals, including rare, endemic, threatened, vulnerable, and ethnobotanical species (Sharma and Kumar, 2020). Pertaining to resource management, Bahuguna *et al.* (1994), noted that "it is a process through which society exercises equitable and sustainable control, distribution and exploitation of the resources" (269).

Currently, sacred groves face numerous challenges that threaten their future. According to Ray and Ramchandra (2010), today's groves are central to ecological research, conservation policies, and management strategies at both state and national levels. However, they also noted that sacred groves are increasingly at risk due to unplanned developmental activities, along with biological threats like invasive species, soil erosion, and land-use changes. Social challenges, such as diminishing beliefs, disregard for social taboos, shifts in religious and cultural practices, and population growth, further endanger these areas. Borthakur (2013) also highlighted that external factors are accelerating the depletion of sacred groves, placing them in jeopardy. Additionally, the younger generation in indigenous communities is losing trust in traditional knowledge due to the influence of modern education.

According to Ray and Ramachandra (2010), the size of sacred groves ranges from less than 1 hectare to over 100 hectares, depending on their location and management. Larger groves, often part of reserve or protected forests or under strong community management, are prioritized in conservation efforts due to their size, biodiversity, cultural, and heritage significance. However, shifts in social and cultural attitudes have impacted grove management, threatening their survival. This issue is particularly severe for smaller sacred groves, especially those under 1 hectare, which face greater challenges from biological, social, and developmental disturbances. These smaller groves are often dismissed as insignificant vegetation patches, lacking biological, ecological, or financial value. This raises important questions: Are these small, degrading groves truly insignificant? Do they play a role in the local ecosystem? Is conservation necessary to prevent their further decline? These concerns require careful consideration.

## **SACRED GROVES**

Sacred groves are patches of preserved forest where there is a spiritual, and religious significance in the lives of tribals (Ray *et al.* 2014). Borthakur describes sacred groves as areas of forests or natural vegetation that are devoted to local deities, ancestral spirits, or tree spirits. Anwasha Borthakur asserts that local communities play a vital role in conserving and protecting these sacred groves. Indeed, the religious beliefs and long-standing traditional rituals of tribal communities are closely tied to the natural forest, reflecting a form of conservation. Sacred groves can be comprised of multi-species, multi-tiered primary forests or clusters of trees, depending on the historical context of the vegetation (2013). These groves are essentially portions of the landscape that include vegetation, various forms of life, and geographical features, all of which are defined and safeguarded by human societies. This protection stems from the belief that maintaining these areas in a relatively undisturbed condition reflects the relationship between humans, the divine, and nature.

Regarding the emergence of sacred groves, Gadgil and Vartak noted that these areas originated during the hunting-gathering phase of human social evolution. If this is the case, they have existed for many centuries, possibly even before the 6th century, when agriculture likely began in the Western Ghats region. In line with the beliefs of hunter-gatherers, the deities associated

with sacred groves are fierce, and when angered, they are known to punish wrongdoers with nothing less than death (Borthakur 2013).

Borthakur (2013) further argued that local communities preserve natural groves through social taboos and sanctions, which reflect the spiritual and ecological values of these communities.

## **GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF SACRED GROVES**

Malhotra *et al* (2001) reported that as per WWF, the Andhra Pradesh has more than 750 sacred groves which were from 23 districts and among them 2 were from Adilabad<sup>1</sup> which comes under Gondwana region. However, in the context of Maharashtra, Malhotra *et al* (2001) have noted that the sacred groves in Western part are called as *Devraior Devrahati*. Gadgil and Vartak reported the presence of 233 sacred groves in the districts of Thane, Raigad, Jalgaon, Pune, Satara, Kolhapur, Yewatmal, Bhandara, and Chandrapur. In contrast, a study by the Bombay Natural History Society indicates that approximately 1,600 sacred groves exist in Maharashtra. However, Malhotra *et al.* (2001) noted that the distribution of these sacred groves coincides with the distribution of forests in the state. They also pointed out that there are no reports available regarding the presence of sacred groves in the central semi-arid region. In fact, the average size of these groves is just a few acres, with larger groves being found only occasionally. In the western and eastern parts, smaller groves seldom permit resource extraction. Malhotra *et al* (2001) noted that sacred groves form an important landscape feature in the deforested hill ranges of the Western Ghats of Maharashtra.

## **SACRED GROVES OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT**

Malhotra *et al.* (2001) reported that there is limited literature on the ownership and management of sacred groves. They observed significant variations in the legal status and management practices of these groves across the country. Malhotra *et al.* categorized the ownership of sacred groves based on legal tenurial rights into three groups: the first is under the control of state forest departments; the second is managed by revenue and other government departments; and the third consists of private ownership, which includes individuals, families, clans, or trust bodies. Similarly, Ormsby (2011) noted that in most cases, sacred groves are privately owned or community land rather than formally protected

government areas or parks. However, the management and ownership of these groves vary from state to state in India, with different approaches even within individual states.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF SACRED GROVES**

Regarding the significance of sacred groves, Malhotra *et al.* (2001) noted that there are variations in their management, including aspects such as maintenance, protection, the performance of rituals and festivals, conflict resolution, and the harvesting of biomass. Malhotra *et al.* (2001) discussed the various services and functions of sacred groves, categorizing them based on different aspects. They identified a religious aspect, where people, especially tribal communities, honour their deities, ancestral spirits, and totems. Under the broader category of secular functions, they noted that sacred groves provide cultural space for the community as a common property resource. From a political perspective, these groves serve as a means for asserting group identity, fostering solidarity, and establishing new alliances. In terms of health, sacred groves are believed to contribute to fertility and paternity, ensuring the well-being of individuals, families, and the community. Furthermore, it is thought that sacred groves influence rainfall, leading to good agricultural yields, promoting the health of crops and livestock, and contributing to successful hunting. These spaces also facilitate the exchange of gifts among people. On a psychological level, sacred groves offer moral support and guidance to individuals in their quest for survival.

## **GENDER AND SACRED GROVES**

Pertaining to the role of gender in case of sacred groves, Malhotra *et al.* (2001) noted that the role of the gender in sacred groves can be analyzed at least at four levels a) the gender of the deity associated with the sacred groves. b) the gender of the priest serving the groves. c) the nature and extent of access men and women in various rituals, festivals and ceremonies that takes place in the groves, and harvesting of biomass from the groves. d) the role of gender in the management of the groves. Regarding the role of gender in sacred groves, Malhotra *et al.* (2001) indicated that this area requires further investigation. They observed that, generally, women are not permitted to enter the groves after reaching puberty. Additionally, concerning the management of sacred

groves and gender, they noted a lack of literature addressing the role of women in decision-making processes related to these groves.

## **FACTORS AFFECTING FOREST DEGRADATION PRE-INDEPENDENCE**

Regarding the extraction of Indian forest resources, Arun Kumar (2024) discusses various colonial agendas, noting that the colonial state was interested in promoting private capital (mostly European) in the colonization of waste lands and making them arable for production, primarily for cash crops such as tea in Assam. On the other hand, it required a large pool of ready labour for its expanding infrastructural projects related to resource extraction, including the expansion of arable land, canal construction, railways, and plantation farms. He also noted that this labour was expected to come from rural areas. On the other hand, regarding India's national environmental policies, Ormsby (2011) noted that the imperial forest department was established in 1864 when India was under British rule. The British foresters in India drew on German and French models to develop single-species plantations with trees arranged in straight lines. Under British rule, forests that were once community resources became state-controlled and restricted from community use, primarily serving the resource needs of the state, such as the construction of railways. The Forest Rights Act of 1865 resulted in large tracts of forest being taken over and controlled by the state through the revenue department. This revenue-oriented colonial land policy led to the commercial exploitation of forests (Ormsby 2011, Shangpliang 2012). Shangpliang (2012) further noted that the National Forest Policy of 1864, adopted by the British, recognized four categories of forest: 1) forests for timber and commerce, 2) forests for pasture land, 3) forests for climate regulation, and 4) forests for minor produce.

The literature highlights that during the colonial period, forest resources were managed for multiple purposes, leading to significant detrimental effects on these valuable ecosystems. Consequently, the situation did not improve even after independence.

## **FACTORS AFFECTING FOREST DEGRADATION POST-INDEPENDENCE**

However, the sacred groves were protected through social fencing and local community traditions, rather than legal status or government protection. Social

fencing, in relation to sacred groves, refers to community cultural practices that create and maintain a virtual boundary recognized in association with the groves. Ormsby (2011) further stated that, for decades after independence in 1947, forest policy continued to be implemented in a similar manner. However, modernization, industrialization, and increased encroachment, along with the misuse of forest resources, are increasingly threatening sacred groves (Sharma and Kumar 2020). Bahuguna *et al.* (1994) discussed various extraneous factors contributing to forest degradation, including the rapidly increasing human and livestock populations, poverty, the expansion of agricultural lands, excessive local fuelwood consumption, overgrazing by livestock, rapid industrialization, and the construction of hydroelectric dams (269). In a study by Bahuguna *et al.* (1994), it was noted that in India, approximately 23 percent of the land area is covered by forest and is controlled and managed by the government through a well-organized and professionally constituted forest service (269). They further argued that the technical bias and bureaucratic functioning of the service tend to exclude sociological dimensions in the management, resulting in misunderstandings, alienation, and mistrust between the people and the government agencies (269). Regarding community involvement in government-led natural resource management, Bahuguna *et al.* (1994) noted that “to engage the public in natural resource management, the Indian government, in alignment with its national forest policy of 1988, adopted a resolution on June 1, 1990. This resolution formalized the involvement of local people and forest dwellers in forest protection management and in sharing the benefits from such forests, through the establishment of village forest protection committees (VFPCs)” (269). In 1990, the Joint Forest Management (JFM) program was initiated to assign responsibility for forest care to local communities. The concept behind JFM was that the forest department would encourage active community involvement in forest management, which would, in turn, grant communities’ certain rights to utilize non-timber forest products. Evidently, state policies on forests have impacted the lives of people who are entirely dependent on these resources. Bhaskar *et al.* (2015) observed that development and conservation policies that discourage traditional forest management practices, which have historically ensured food security for indigenous and local communities, have inevitably led to the loss of traditional knowledge underpinning these practices (77). Shubhra (2002) noted that Madhav Gadgil observed that with massive

deforestation in areas close to villages due to industrialization, tribals are being deprived of their food and subsistence. They have to walk longer distances to collect the limited forest produce that remains and to search for drinking water. This leads to their impoverishment, making them vulnerable to moneylenders and industrial agents. Consequently, indebtedness, land alienation, and bondage are increasing in tribal areas. Deprived of their livelihoods, some tribals resort to destructive practices, such as cutting trees for sale as fuelwood or working as wage or bonded labourers for timber contractors and smugglers (82). Shubhra (2002) also discussed new methods of tribal land alienation, stating that new methods of alienating tribals from their land have been observed recently. Common among them is indebtedness, through which debtors are trapped and their lands are seized. Encroachments on tribal lands are also noted, as tribals are considered powerless. There is a visible nexus between non-tribal moneylenders, encroachers, merchants, and government officials (82).

The above literature depicts that there is socio-cultural significance of sacred groves in the lives of tribal but on the other hand these sacred groves are in danger due to various extraneous factors. On the same line an attempt was made to assess the sacred groves in Kinwat block in Nanded district from Maharashtra.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In the view of study settings and major objectives of this research paper which has the following objectives i.e. to discuss the sacred groves and its symbiotic relations with tribals, to discuss the sacred groves and socio-cultural life of Gonds, Pradhan and Kolam from the grass root level to assess various factors affecting the sacred groves in the contemporary era. The study was undertaken in five tribal villages from Kinwat blocks of Nanded District of Maharashtra. This Kinwat block is identified under Tribal Scheduled Plan (TSP) which falls under the Gondwana region of the Maharashtra State. Gond Tribe was dominated in this region followed by Pradhan and Kolam tribes and other tribal communities such as; Bhil, Andhs and others. However, this study made attempt to focus on the role of sacred groves in these three communities of the Gondwana region. For this research paper, study used purposive sampling method to select five tribal villages of the Kinwat block of Nanded Districts of the same region. The selection of the village made on the basis of predominant

residence of Gonds, Pradhan and Kolam were selected for the intensive study. Total nine periodical visits were made during July 2024 to October 2024, in the settlements of the above tribes' in-depth interviews, focus group discussions were conducted. Key informants, such as old age persons, Bamboo artisanal worker and traditional healers were selected based on purposive sampling and snow ball sampling. Secondary data was gathered using past studies articles, books, government documents and gazetteers etc.

## **STUDY AREA**

About Area and People: Nanded lies between 18° 16' and 19° 55' north latitude and 76° 56' and 78° 19' east longitude. It has an area of 10, 528 sq. km\* (<http://nanded.gov.in>) and a population is 3361292 (2011). The district has a total tribal population of 2.82 lakhs (as per the 2011 census), constituting 8.39% of the total population. It is the easternmost district in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra. Geographically, it is bordered to the north by Hingoli and Yavatmal districts, to the west by Parbhani and Beed districts, to the south by Latur and Beed districts along with a district from Karnataka, and to the east by Nizamabad and Adilabad districts of Telangana.

For administrative purposes, the district is divided into eight subdivisions, one of which is Kinwat, the focus of this study. The origin of the district headquarters' name, Nanded, has several explanations. One suggests that it derives from "Nandi tat," referring to the bank of the Godavari River where Nandi, Lord Shiva's vahana (mount), is believed to have performed penance. Another explanation attributes the name to nine sages (rishis) called Nand, who meditated on the Godavari's banks, hence "Nand tat." A third theory links it to the boundary or "tat" of the nine Nanda rulers of the Magadha Empire.

The northern boundary of the district, separating it from Yavatmal, follows the winding course of the Penganga River, giving it a highly sinuous character. Moving southwards from the Penganga, the eastern boundary traces the hills east and south of the river, extending about 1.5 kilometers beyond the point where the southward road from Himayatnagar crosses the hills. Beyond this, the boundary is primarily administrative until it reaches the Godavari River. Further south, the Godavari forms the district boundary for approximately 13 kilometers, followed by the Manjra and Lendi rivers up to Hanuman Hipparga.

In areas beyond these rivers, the district's boundaries are mostly administrative, occasionally following minor water divides and stream courses.

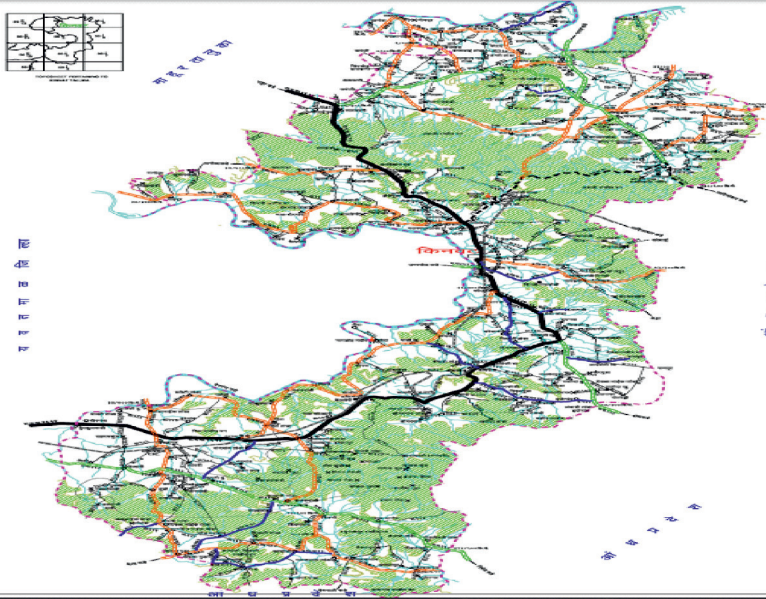
In Nanded district, the hills predominantly run in a northwest to southeast direction in parallel ranges, with offshoots typically extending perpendicularly. However, this pattern has been significantly altered by differential erosion. Starting in the north, the first range, known as the Satmala, enters the district after being interrupted by the Penganga River west of Mahur. This range features three distinct terraces.

The lowest terrace, about 100 meters above the Penganga valley flats at an elevation of 350 meters above sea level, hosts small tanks and villages amidst cultivated fields, with Mahur being the largest and regarded as a sacred site. The middle terrace, at 570 meters above sea level, rises steeply from all sides except the south, which has been shaped by stream erosion. A fort is located on this terrace, benefiting from the natural defenses of the Penganga encircling the hill on all sides except the east, along with the dense jungle slopes inhabited by wild animals. The highest terrace, at 600 meters, is densely forested. (Kunte, 1971).

**Forest:** The total area under forest in Nanded district is 12,33.77 kilometer (476.36 sq. miles) this works out to 12 per cent of the total area of the district as against a corresponding percentage of 21.6 for the whole of state. The forest is mainly concentrated in Kinwat taluka. The forest of Nanded district is hub of various trees, plants, herbs, climbers etc., are found as follows: *Teak (Tectona grandis)*, *Dhavda (Anogeissus latifolia)* and *Salai (Boswellia serrata)*, *Moi or Mina (Lannea grandis)*, *Ain (Terminalia Tomentosa)*, *kalam (Mitiagynaparrifolia)*, *Hiwar (Acacia leucophea)* *Khair (Acacia Catechu)* *Tiwas (Ougeniadalbergioides)* etc. *Palas (Butea frondosa)* *Gelida (Randia dumetorum)*, *Dhaity (Woodfordia floribunda)* etc. *climbers like Karvta (CriptolepisBuchanam)*, *Kavali (Gymnemacylvestris)*, and *Palasbel (Butea sperba)* etc. are found in Kinwat. There is also Bamboo (*Dendrocalamusstrictus*) grows in limited areas in Kinwat forest.

**Animals:** Tigers, bears and sambhars are found in Kinwat taluka. Panthers, deers, foxes, wild boars are found all over Nanded district. **Birds:** jungle fowls, partridges and peacocks are found all over Nanded. However, verities of migratory birds are found in Kinwat in winter seasons only. Thus, this study area has rich biodiversity. The local tribal communities have developed constructive,

symbolic and organic relationship with the nature. These communities are nature worshipers. They developed their culture in the lap of nature. Their socio-cultural and economical activities are associated with the nature. They have developed harmonious relationship with the natural resources.



Kinwat Map Source: <https://cdn.s3waas.gov.in/>

**Table 1: Classification of Forest Areas in Nanded District (Areas in Hecter)**

Sr. No.	Forest Area	Reserved forest	Proposed Protected Forest	Protected Forest	Non classified forest	Total
1	Kinwat	14,177.30	3,215.92	200.26	0	62,651.56
2	Mahur	9,985.13	0	299.20	3,094.97	13,474.30

Source: Pathak A. S. 2011

Tribal especially Gond, Kolam and Pradhan from Kinwat block, has close association with the forest. Their subsistence, livelihood, deities and overall culture have been revolved around the forest. In fact, tribal have sacred belief pertaining to the forest. Their existence without forest is impossible. The table no. 1 above depicts that after the forest which was declared protected and reserved their mere entry into the forest was banned and was restricted. There are many Gond, Kolam and Pradhan individuals have claimed that many forest officials have not allowed them in the forest. However, this mere restriction has

broken the age-old relations between forest and tribes. However, forest rights Act when was introduced it has tried to bridge again the gap between tribals and forest. But, in reality on the ground, the age old values and belief system of tribal Gond, Kolam and Pradhan, pertaining to forest have come down, many of them go for agricultural cultivation and daily wage labour or some migrate in the nearest city where ample of opportunities are available.

### **Case Study 1: Sacred Groves, Role of Deities, Fragmented Sacred Patches**

It has been observed that, particularly in the Kinwat region, there is no official identification of sacred patches. However, social scientists, policymakers, and planners have not properly documented the sacred groves of this Gondwana region. The sacred groves are scattered in fragmented positions throughout the area. It was found that local tribes, such as the Gond, Kolam, and Pradhan, worship various deities like Rajoba, Raytad, and Jangobai, which are found in these sacred patches. All agricultural festivals and rituals take place in these sacred spaces. It was also observed that the Kolam, who hold a priestly status among these tribes, perform certain rituals before the monsoon sowing season in front of the Rajoba deity. They propitiate the Rajoba deity to ensure a good harvest and the well-being of the tribes. The deity is offered a sacrificial lamb, and new seeds, sourced from the market, are placed in front of the deity. After the sacrificial ritual, the blood is mixed with cooked rice and sprinkled across the agricultural fields. It is believed that this ritual protects crops from pests and ensures a good harvest. All tribes from 4 to 5 villages come together to perform the ritual for the Rajoba deity. The Rajoba temple is always located in a dense forest, typically near the roadside, surrounded by trees. The tribe believes their Rajoba deity resides in these trees, and they avoid cutting trees near these temples. There is another deity known as Raitad Pen, also known as Jango Raitad, is a tribal deity predominantly worshipped by the Gonds. In Jawarla, there is a sacred space dedicated to Jango Raitad. A significant place for the worship of this deity is Pullikachhar, located in the Adilabad district of Telangana. The ritual worship of Jango Raitad requires a journey to Pullikachhar, where a sacred pond is located. Gond tribes from 4 to 5 villages around Jawarla, along with the official priest, take an effigy of the Jango Raitad deity to Pullikachhar for the ritual. The priest carries the effigy and immerses it in the sacred water pond as part of a purification ritual. After this, the Gonds

prepare "Gharka" (made of black gram), which is offered to the JangoRaitad deity. A sacrificial lamb is also offered, followed by a feast where mutton curry and rice are served to all devotees.



**Photo 1: Rajoba Deity in the forest**



**Photo 2: Deity Flag in the forest**

Source: Field visit during October 2024.

The Gonds believe that this ritual has significant health benefits. They believe that JangoRaitad controls pests in the farms, keeps famine away from the village and agricultural fields, and ensures that wild animals stay away from the farms. For them, performing this ritual is essential. The ritual takes place during the month of "Pus Mahina" (January). During this time, the Gonds, along with the Kolam and Pradhan tribes, avoid contact with non-tribals, as their touch is considered polluting. In fact, the tribes observe a month-long practice of avoiding any form of pollution. Apart from sacred groves, certain animals and places are also considered sacred in the Gondwana region. The tribes from this area worship sacred groves, trees, and specific places that are particularly revered. It has been observed that there is no secondary material available from this area documenting any officially declared sacred groves. This clearly reflects negligence in covering these sacred natural sites by both academicians and policymakers. The sacred groves in this area exist as fragmented patches, and their study needs to be properly documented.

In Pimpalgaon village, it was observed that there are large-scale community forest areas, though the forest department still has control over these community forests. In this region, there has been no official identification of sacred patches. Social scientists, policymakers, and planners have not properly documented the sacred groves in the region. These sacred groves are scattered and fragmented, but the Gond, Kolam, and Pradhan tribes continue to worship them on certain occasions. Their agricultural practices such as preparing land for cultivation, harvesting crops, and caring for the farming fields are intertwined with certain rituals that are part of their annual calendar. In Limguda village, Gond farmers pointed out specific places and trees that are considered sacred. Deities such as Rajoba, Jangubai, Bhimdev, Rani Dev, and Ful Dev are worshipped in sacred sites often located in dense forests.

One particularly sacred place is Ramkhori, located in the dense forest on the hills, where there is a small pond. The tribes regard this water as sacred, and they carry it to their fields, where it is sprinkled. It is believed that this sacred water protects crops from pests and diseases and increases the crops' resistance power. The tribes also have totems associated with their Gotra, which include birds like the peacock and animals such as the tiger, ox, and cow. Reptiles like snakes and tortoises are also considered sacred, and the tribes refrain from harming them.

## **Case study 2: Forest Department Verses Gonds and Forest Control**

According to the Gonds, their forests have been destroyed by external forces. They claim that non-tribal people are responsible for the cutting of their sacred groves. A 60-year-old Kolam man from Kajipod shared that their village was originally situated near the hills, where their deities and sacred groves were once present. However, the forest department later restricted them from entering the forest and outsiders, referred to as Baherche Lok, destroyed their sacred trees, such as Sag, Apta, Umbar, and Salai, which are considered sacred. Kashinath holds the forest department and non-tribals responsible for the destruction of their sacred groves. According to him, the intention behind cutting down their sacred trees was purely for monetary gain. He reported that while the forest department controlled their forest and restricted their access, many corrupt officials allowed non-tribals to enter and cut down valuable trees like Sag. The high demand for Sag and similar trees in the market has significantly impacted the forest. It is believed that trees like Sag, Apta, Umbar, and Salai are home to their deities, and cutting them is considered a sin and a taboo. However, there are certain seasons in their calendar when the tribes perform rituals to honor their deities, allowing them to use the wood from these trees in a controlled manner. The Gonds, Kolam, and other tribes consider certain trees sacred, and this belief prevents them from cutting the trees, creating a community-driven system of natural conservation. Unfortunately, external forces exploiting the forest for commercial benefits have drastically impacted the faith of the tribal communities. The strong, age-old beliefs in the sacredness of these trees and spaces are slowly eroding. Younger generations are increasingly drawn to non-agricultural activities, leading many to migrate to cities, further diminishing the traditional practices. In Bhil Gaon, it was found that although the villagers have common ownership over the forest, it is the forest department that conducts the auction of Tendu leaves (Patta). The villagers involved in plucking the Tendu leaves receive either daily wages or payment for each bundle of leaves from the forest department. It is the forest department that sells the Tendu leaves and earns revenue from them. This situation highlights that the concept of community ownership over the forest still needs to be properly defined. Many tribal in the Gondwana region remain unaware of their rights regarding certain forest trees and spaces.

**Table 2: Sacred Trees of Tribal from Gondwana Region**

Sr. No	Name of the Sacred species	Part used	Scientific name	Cultural Significance
1	<i>Amba</i>	Leaves	<i>Mangifera Indica</i>	Worship and Marriage
2	<i>Kumbhai</i>	Fruit	<i>Careya Arborea</i>	Marriage
3	<i>Ruchki plant</i>	Flower/stems	<i>Baccaureamotleyana</i>	Worship and Medicinal
4	<i>Awlah</i>	Fruits	<i>Phyllanthus emblica</i>	Worship
5	<i>Kadulimb</i>	Leaves	<i>Azadirachta indica</i>	Worship
6	<i>Bel</i>	Fruit/Leaves	<i>Aegle Marmelos</i>	Worship/ Medicinal
7	<i>Moh</i>	Flower	<i>Madhuca longifolia</i>	Worship/Medicinal
8	<i>Palash</i>	Leaves	<i>Butea monosperma</i>	Plates
9	<i>Umbar</i>	Fruit	<i>Ficus racemosa</i>	Worship
10	<i>Khair</i>	branch	<i>Senegalia catechu</i>	Marriage
11	<i>Apta</i>	Leaves	<i>Bauhinia racemosa</i>	Worship
12	<i>Wad</i>	Leave	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i>	Worship
13	<i>Pimpal</i>	Leave	<i>Ficus religiosa</i>	Worship
14	<i>Jambhul</i>	Fruit	<i>Syzygiumcumini</i>	Marriage
15	<i>Sag</i>	Leave	<i>Teak</i>	Worship

Source: Primary data, 2024.

The table 2. Shows that there are over fifteen types of trees and plants varieties which plays vital role during the various cultural practices, carried out by Gond, Kolam and Pradhan tribes from Kinwat block. The above plant varieties if are not available the tribals feel that it would not be possible to complete the ritual. There are also certain deities like Bada dev, JangoRaitad, Rani Maa, Rajoba their temples are found in the forest in the old days these no one was dare to cut the trees nearby their deities, but in course of time due to intervention of outsiders the sacred grove cover near by the temples of the deities have been decreased and it has also affected the faith and belief system of the tribals from Gond, Kolam and Pradhan. In fact, at present few Gond, Kolam and Pradhan leaders from Kinwat villages have planned a sacred patch to be completely devoted for Jangobai nearby hills. It shows their efforts towards revitalization of old wisdom of sacred groves. They want their old customs and traditions but many have become pessimistic because of poverty and economical challenges they face at present. Thus, the gathered information from the field about the sacred trees in this region reflects the different uses of these trees in their life. Table shows that these tribal people used sacred trees in the different purposes, some of them have cultural significances, some

of the have significances in the marriages and worships. Some of them have economical values in their life.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

In the context of this region, study identified the interlinkages between tribal culture and nature. Since time immemorial, these three tribal communities Gond, Kolam and Pradhan have been living in this region. Historically, Gond was dominated in this region, as result of this; this region was recognized as Gondwana region. Gond was rulers and King of this region. Pradhans were secretariats of the Gond rulers. Pradhan supported to the Gond in administration and other activities, therefore, these two communities have similar socio-culture, festivals, deities and rituals. Kolams are also living in this region nearby to the Gond villages. However, they maintain some distances from the Gond and Pradhan, but they also participated in the ritual, festivals and socio-cultural activities of the Gond. Overall, these three communities have socio-cultural similarities. In the studied villages, we observed and found that these three communities have developed interactive, interconnected and reciprocal relations among them. They participated in the each other's festivals, rituals and social functions. They worship similar kind of deities, sacred groves, trees and species. Mostly, these communities preserved trees those have social-cultural and economical values in their life. They worships sag tree (teak tree), Mahu flower, Apata and local deities Bhimdev, Rajoba, Jangubai, Parsapen, etc. Despite these, they also worshiped local deities also. The old aged people of these communities have very rich and indigenous knowledge about the biodiversity, traditional seeds, medicinal plants and varieties. In the present context, these people are facing problems to sustain the old wisdoms, knowledge, tools and techniques. They are in the dilemmas in the preservation of the tradition and old culture in the contemporary era. Under the name of development and change, the developmental organizations, agencies and policy makers are trying to impose modern tools, techniques, equipments on the tribal communities. As result of this, these people are losing their arts, skills, techniques of preparing the different tools, equipments, technologies for use. Now , they are getting ready made and modern tools and techniques for uses. In the old days, they used to prepare and use their arts and skills of using traditional tools for agriculture, hunting, and daily uses. In the present context,

it is seen that their old knowledge is undermining and neglected. It is also seen and observed that their local deities were open in the forest, but now the local political leaders are giving shade them , they are taking the forms of modern temples. It is seen and observed that many external forces are posing major threats on the sustainability of the culture and nature of the local tribal people. Despite these forces, still the old aged tribal people are interested to preserve their culture, identity, sacred places, trees and species. These sacred groves have multiples roles in their socio-cultural and economical life of the people. These people have developed symbolic, constructive and organic relationship with the sacred groves and trees. They worshiped them on the various occasions. They couldn't do their agricultural activities, sowing, reaping, harvesting and gathering forest resources without worshiping their local deities.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Gonds have a close association with allied tribes such as the Kolam and Pradhan, who consider certain trees sacred. Sacred groves are culturally significant for the Gond tribals from the Gondwana region. It is believed that all the deities of the Gonds reside in the forest, and there are certain trees that are sacred, which they do not cut down. This practice demonstrates their age-old conservation efforts. The lives of the Gonds depend on the forest; in fact, their subsistence comes from it. Despite this, they have not completely destroyed the forest. The Gonds believe that the destruction of the forest is caused by outsiders, who have also destroyed their sacred trees from the past. The sudden control over the forest by certain state departments has created confusion among the tribes, making it difficult for them to morally categorize their sacred groves. There are fragmented areas where certain trees still exist; these are not cut down by the Gonds, Kolam, or Pradhan due to their sacredness. There are also specific taboos and sanctions imposed by the tribes regarding entry into the forest, which help prevent human disturbance. This indigenous belief system, which restricts tribals from cutting down the forest, is considered a community-driven approach to forest conservation. It has been observed that in the Gondwana region, there are certain patches of forest where tribal deities are located. However, these places are not officially declared as sacred groves because they are small patches fragmented by certain state departments. On the other hand, this aspect is also neglected by academics, which requires urgent investigation.

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### *Note*

1. Adilabad earlier was part of Andhra Pradesh but after the state got bifurcated, now this region comes under Telangana. Adilabad is very close to Kinwat, Nanded district, Maharashtra.

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