AGPE THE ROYAL GONDWANA RESEARCH JOURNAL
OF HISTORY, SCIENCE, ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCE
ISSN (E): 2583-1348 | A Peer reviewed | An Open Access & Indexed
Volume 07 | Issue 11 | November 2026 | *www.agpegondwanajournal.co.in* | Page No. 22-33

SACRED GROVES AS SITES OF ECO-RELIGIOUS LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF THE GOND COMMUNITY IN JHARSUGUDA DISTRICT OF ODISHA

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Abstract:

Sacred groves are forest tracts of varying size, from a few trees to hectares that are conserved by communities for religious reasons. In India, sacred groves represent one of the oldest existing forms of community conservation. In this paper, sacred groves are presented as places of eco-religious learning, whereby ecological knowledge, morality, ritual performance, and attachment are simultaneously passed down from generation to generation. The example of the Gond community of Jharsuguda district in western Odisha, the literature on sacred natural sites, indigenous religions, and situated learning and developed a framework to understand the grove as an outdoor classroom. The researcher discusses eco-religious learning in the context of four aspects: cosmological (the grove as the home of deities and ancestors), ethical (rules and prohibitions), practical (species ecology, water, soil, medicine) and social (festivals, kinship and multi-generational learning). The paper also examines pressures exerted on this teaching system by activities such as mining, industrial development, shifting land use patterns, migration of people, formal education and religious reforms, and looks at the impact that legal measures like the Forest Rights Act 2006 and the Biological Diversity Act 2002 have on the groves. The paper argues that the sacred groves need to be viewed not just as relics of conservation but also as live teaching institutions, and suggests that there is a need for community-based documentation, recognition of rights over community forests and incorporation of grove-based knowledge into education. Empirical statements relating to individual villages are provided as the framework for analysis and research design.

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Keywords: Sacred Groves, Eco-Religious Learning, Indigenous Knowledge, Community Conservation

1. Introduction:

Small forest patches across South Asia are distinguished from other areas in that they are considered home to a god, spirit or ancestors. Activities such as wood cutting, hunting, grazing or even entering the groves may be prohibited if not done in a certain manner. Ecologists have always noted that such groves tend to preserve species that are no longer present in other parts of the landscape, springs, seeds and medicinal plants (Gadgil and Vartak 1976; Malhotra, Deb and Ramakrishnan 2007). On the other hand, anthropologists and scholars of religion stress a different point: the grove is first and foremost a place of worship, and conservation is an outcome of worship, not its goal.

The aim of this paper is to bring these two perspectives together with a third perspective, which is much less explored: learning. A grove is a space in which one learns who they are, who they owe respect and obligation to, how they should act towards non-human creatures, and how the landscape around them operates. Such education is gained not from books, but from rituals, myths, taboos, observation and joint activities. The concept of eco-religious learning is used for that purpose.

The research analyzes the Gond of Jharsuguda district, which is located in western Odisha. The Gond form one of the biggest indigenous (ST) communities in India, being found mainly in central parts of India and a number of districts in western and southern parts of Odisha. Jharsuguda is an industrializing district characterized by coal mines, power generation and metal industries as well as forest fringe villages; therefore, it is quite illustrative as a setting for researching sustainability of a traditional learning institution amid fast-changing conditions.

1.1 The Gond community

The Gond is recognised as a Scheduled Tribe and constitutes second largest tribal population in India. Gond religion centres on a pantheon of clan and village deities and on the veneration of ancestors, with a notable cosmic figure often called *Budha Deo* or *Bada Deo* associated with the *sal* tree in many regional traditions, and with a clan-based system of totemic divisions and gods (pen). Ethnographic works on the Gond, beginning with Grigson's study of the Maria Gond of Bastar and Verrier Elwin's writings on central Indian tribes, record a worldview in which forest, hills and streams are inhabited by powers that must be respected.

Gond communities in western Odisha live alongside Odia-speaking caste Hindus and other indigenous groups such as the Kharia, Munda, Oram, and Kisan. Cultural exchange has been extensive; deities and festivals blend indigenous and regional Hindu elements.

Jharsuguda District is situated in the western part of the State of Odisha and falls in the belt of Sambalpur-Jharsuguda. It has dry deciduous forest, paddy fields, and plateau terrain. There is a

total forest area of about 328.89 sq. km. in this district, which accounts for about 15.8 percent of the geographical area of the district. Moderately dense forest occupies an area of 169.72 sq. km., while an open forest covers an area of 156.42 sq. km. In very dense forests, there is an area of 2.75 sq. km. According to the census of 2011, the population of Jharsuguda District is 579,505 out of which 176,758 people (or about 30.5 percent) are from Scheduled Tribes. They live in forest areas or nearby places. Industrialization has been going on in Jharsuguda District, especially in the area of the Ib Valley, in thermal power, aluminium, and steel-based industries and related land acquisition. This makes Jharsuguda District a good case study of traditional environmental learning in the area of forest fringe communities.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Sacred groves in India

India is estimated to have well over one hundred thousand sacred groves, though the count is uncertain because many are small, unmapped and known only locally. They are variously called devarakadu or devara kaadu in Karnataka, kavu in Kerala, law lyngdoh and law kyntang in Meghalaya, orans in Rajasthan, deorai or devrai in Maharashtra, and sarna or jaher in parts of eastern and central India. Gadgil and Vartak (1976) brought the groves to scholarly attention in the Western Ghats, and later studies documented them in Meghalaya (Tiwari, Tripathi and Barik 1998), the Western Ghats and elsewhere. Reviews by Bhagwat and Rutte (2006) and Ormsby and Bhagwat (2010) show that groves are ecologically valuable but increasingly threatened, and that their protection depends on the continued strength of the belief systems behind them.

Groves are linked to the village deities and tribal religions in Odisha and have names depending on the language and culture of the region. They generally include a shrine, platform, stones, terracotta offering, or simply an altar under a big tree like *sal* (Shorea robusta), mahua (Madhuca longifolia), banyan, or peepal tree. The boundaries of these groves might be defined traditionally without fencing them.

2.2 Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Religion

According to Berkes (2012), traditional ecological knowledge is a knowledge-practice-belief complex, which means that what people know, how they practice, and what they believe is one integrated whole. Traditional knowledge arises out of adaptive learning and is transferred culturally. In India, sacred groves provide evidence of this complex, as traditions that exist in the groves pass ecological knowledge through oral history, festivals, and community actions (Mudgil, 2025). Rao (2022) also claims that the idea of sacredness in forest conservation is based on traditional knowledge systems in India and that it is essential to revive them in order to preserve conservation in sacred groves. Gadgil, Berkes and Folke (1993) propose the idea that taboos and ritual prohibitions can be used as ecological prudence instruments in order to conserve endangered species and ecosystems, even though participants do not know anything about conservation. A famous example by Rappaport (1968) on the ritual of Tsembaga Maring serves as proof of that

position. In western Odisha, similar evidence for the influence of local rules and culture on forest conservation through the study of sacred forests also exists (Pradhan & Ormsby, 2020), and how incorporating traditional knowledge along with official guidelines such as the Forest Rights Act of 2006 can enhance conservation efforts (Mallick, 2024).

2.3 Community-based learning

The theory of situated learning developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) states that learners participate in learning through legitimate peripheral participation, in which the novice starts his/her learning as a periphery of the community and then proceeds with performing minor tasks until he/she becomes a full-fledged member. Learning and identity construction go hand in hand. According to Kimmerer (2013), indigenous learning takes place relationally and is based on reciprocity between humans and other living beings. Considering groves, one may conclude that the child, who offers flowers, follows the priest, stays away from a prohibited trail, or helps elders to pick medicine plants learns in every possible way despite the lack of conscious teaching process.

2.4 Eco-religious Learning Defined

Eco-religious learning, in the context of this study, may be defined as the gradual, collective, and situational process by which the members of a particular community come to know and understand (a) a particular cosmology which locates human beings within a larger moral community composed of other beings beyond humanity, (b) particular rules of restraint and reciprocity towards such beings, (c) skills of practical knowledge about plant, animal, water, soil and seasonal life, and (d) social identity associated with a particular landscape. Eco means ecology; religion means religion, while learning means education.

3. IMPORTANCE

The vast majority of grove research considers the number of species in a grove, its area or even its rules. Far less research considers the way in which knowledge about the grove is reproduced. This is important to know because, without such reproduction, a grove may exist for a few years but will lack that social dedication which preserves it. On the contrary, a grove with small tree cover may be very much alive from the cultural point of view.

4. METHODS FOR DATA COLLECTION

4.1 Research design

The researcher used an ethnographic case study methodology in order to explore the role of the sacred grove as a site of inter-generational learning in the context of the Gond tribe. The reason behind choosing the same is that the knowledge system of the sacred groves is embedded in rituals, memories, and social life and therefore can only be understood through interaction with the community.

4.2 Field of Study and Site Selection

Field work was carried out in Gond inhabited villages of Jharsuguda district of Odisha. Villages were selected purposively based on the following two criteria: presence of a considerable number of Gond communities and the presence of the sacred groves. The four villages are Bhoidihi, Dhudibahal, Junapali and Dhutra.

4.3 Methods of Data Collection

Several methods were used for collecting the data to enable verification of results via triangulation.

Participant observation: The researcher became a participant observer of the season-based rituals and festivals related to the groves, such as *Andhari puja, Dhutra gard puja* and *Demul puja*. Participant observation involved the identification of actors within particular rites, transmission of ritual knowledge, enactment of rules of the groves, and participation of various age-groups. Detailed field notes were taken on a daily basis.

Semi-structured interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four types of respondents: (a) grove priests popularly known *as pujari, dehuri, kalo* and *gunia*; (b) village elders; (c) women; and (d) youth. The content of the interview guide included the origin and meaning of the grove, rules and prohibitions, ritual practices, resource uses of the grove and changed perceptions. Interviews were carried out in the local language.

Focus group discussions (FGD): Focus group discussions were conducted to find about the collective memory and understanding of the grove rules, sanctions and history of the groves.

Participatory mapping: Both elders and young community members participated in drawing maps of the groves, their boundaries and different zones (for instance, sacred core, restricted zone, regulated use zone). This approach revealed the local conceptualization of space and its governance.

Analysis of the local documentation: All the village documents and resolutions of *Gram Sabha* were analyzed to find out how the groves were managed officially and unofficially and what decisions were taken concerning their protection, boundaries or use.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study focuses on three Gond worship traditions: Andhari Puja, Demul Puja, and Dhutra Gad Puja. All of them have a link with sacred forest sites and act as spaces for intergenerational exchange of knowledge and values.

5.1 *Andhari Puja*

Andhari Puja is considered one of the most prominent traditional religious festivals of the Gond tribe. The Gond considers this worship very pious and considers it highly important. This worship is observed mainly in the Laikera and Kirmira block of Jharsuguda district in Odisha. But

it is celebrated in an extremely grand manner in a village known as Andhari in Laikera block; hence the name of this festival has been coined as '*Andhari Puja.*' Although this worship is traditionally performed by the Gond, nowadays it has turned into a grand celebration that is participated in by people of all communities in the vicinity. This worship is performed on a hill that is made up of seven mountains. The actual *puja* ceremony is performed on the seventh mountain which is considered the holy site for worship. One has to cross six other mountains before reaching this particular place of worship. It is believed that when one crosses these six mountains and worships *Andhari Devi*, all their physical suffering will be washed away.

The *Andhari Puja* held at Bhoidihi village of the Kirmira block is slightly different from the *Andhari Puja* celebrated in Andhari village. In Bhoidihi village, the *puja* is mainly done for the sake of the safety of the entire village. *Andhari Devi* is considered as an incarnation of the Goddess Durga and is also referred to as *Bana Durga* or the Forest Goddess.

The *Andhari Puja* takes place seven days after the start of October every year. The sacred site of *Andhari Devi* is found in the forest region in the remote part of the Bhoidihi village. It is believed by the Gond community that whenever any disaster occurs in their village, it is first confronted by *Andhari Devi* and they are protected by her.

There is a spiritual bonding of the goddess among the villagers of Bhoidihi. Before going out of their village, the villagers bow before *Andhari Devi*. Similarly, whenever they return back, they pray to her. If some villagers go back in the night time, then in the meantime, they think of *Andhari Devi* while moving ahead. Once they arrive there, they feel protected and fearless as they feel they are in the shelter of the goddess.

Kandharpa Bhoi is the priest of Bhoidihi village who started this worship. He is responsible for all the activities of this worship. He is not only the priest but also a shaman.

The Gond community also strongly believes that *Andhari Maa* fulfils the wishes of her devotees. In return, devotees offer animal sacrifices to express their gratitude and seek the goddess's blessings. For example, couples who wish to have children or families facing serious problems pray to *Andhari Maa* during the annual worship. If their wishes are fulfilled during the following year, they offer sacrifices at the next annual celebration as promised. The offerings depend on the wishes made by the devotees. Chickens and goats are considered to be among the goddess's preferred offerings.



(Figure 1 Seven mountain)



(Figure 2 sacred place of *andhari devi*)

5.2 *Demul puja*

Demul puja It is believed by the Gond community that before conducting any kind of rituals or festivities, the first worship should always be conducted in the *Demul,* followed by worshiping in the village.

The village appoints a priest who conducts the rites and rituals, which are conducted on any occasion. This priest is known as *Kalo* by the Gond people. The post of the *Kalo* is never changed. It means that whenever the *Kalo* dies, it is expected of his son to inherit the post. However, if his son does not want to do so because for some reason, then he is replaced by someone else according to the traditional manner.

Some agricultural land is allotted to the priest *Kalo* by the village community because of his responsibility of looking after the safety of the village through the blessings of the *Gramadevi*. The *Kalo* is highly respected in the village. On the occasion of every festival, every household contributes something to the *Kalo*. The contributions are rice, pulses, vegetables, money, *pitha, pana* and other things.

This puja is celebrated on a grand scale every year. During the annual celebration, a black or maroon-coloured male goat is sacrificed to the Gramadevi. The goat is purchased using money collected from all the households in the village.

5.3 *Dhutra Gad Puja*

Dhutra Gad Puja is one of the unique religious traditions practiced only in some villages of kirmira block in Jharsuguda district of Odisha. The festival has great religious and cultural significance among the Gond and is celebrated with great faith and reverence. The reigning goddess, Gad Devi, is very popular among the Gond, who believe that she safeguards them from all sorts of misfortune, troubles, and difficulties in life. They believe that she is a guardian goddess and takes care of their safety and prosperity.

Traditionally, the puja is held after *Paush Purnima* or during any auspicious Saturday or Tuesday in the month of January. The community members assemble together to offer prayers and worships to Goddess Gad Devi and seek her blessings. The whole process of worship is done in accordance with the traditions and beliefs handed down from generation to generation. One of the important aspects of this *puja* is the tradition of sacrificing a cock or a goat.

In accordance with the traditional beliefs of the Gond, it becomes obligatory to offer such a sacrifice to Gad Devi every year because of the blessings, protection, and good fortune of Gad Devi in all respects in life. The belief is that the worship on a yearly basis will ensure the security of the community from any problem in future life.

Dhutura Gad Puja not only marks a sacred ritual but also represents the cultural tradition of the Gond community. It enables the community members to come together and participate in customary rituals for building up social and cultural bonds. This event is marked every year with great fervour and splendour as the community has devoted itself to *Gad Devi*.



(Figure 3 Sacred place of *Gad devi* at Dhutra Village)

6. Dimensions of learning

6.1 Cosmological learning: the grove as a dwelling of the sacred:

The landscape is not devoid of any presence. In all three cultures, the forest is where a named god lives to be spoken to directly.

Divine hierarchy: *Andhari Devi* is both a local guardian, therefore giving the people a cosmology where a forest goddess is placed inside a broader spectrum of gods and goddesses in Hinduism without changing her identity.

Sacred geography: The seven mountain hill becomes a divine geography, where knowing the way is knowing the divine order.

Moral Geography: The inhabitants of Gond bow to the goddess when they leave and enter the place, and the person caught outside at night calls on the goddess; thus, the distinction between a safe and an insecure space also becomes the border of devotion. Since the villagers worship *Demul* before their houses, people understand that the god comes first. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), the process of membership acquisition involves learning how to inhabit this particular geography properly.



(Figure 4 Sacred grove of *Andhari Devi*)



(Figure 5 Sacred grove of *Dutra ard devi*)

6.2 Ethical Learning: Taboo, Restraint, and Reciprocity

The core of the ethical approach involves reciprocity, supplemented by restraint and sincerity.

Reciprocity and Vow:

In the study area, the goddess's requests are fulfilled with sincerity. Childless couples or troubled families make a vow, fulfil it during the next puja, and make the promised offering. This sequence of petition, fulfilment, declaration, and returning the gift implies that there is no benefit for free and that giving creates obligations. Similarly, an annual offering to *Gad Devi* means the same kind of exchange. As described by Gadgil et al. (1993), this type of restraint represents religiously imbued ecological prudence**.**

Regulated sacrifice: In the goat sacrifice in *demul puja*, the goat, during the sacrifice, is given paddy and arua rice, and a sacrifice is made only if it eats the offerings willingly. In the case of refusal, the process is repeated. Informed consent is sought. At Bhoidihi, only the head of the animal goes to the priest, and everything else goes back to the person making the offering, who distributes the rest among the family members and friends. Thus, people know that killing is a serious business, regulated by rules, done openly, and then accompanied by sharing.

Fasting and precedence: Kalo and his wife fast till the process is over because it is said that the goddess herself fasts on that day. The village goddess is invited to weddings and other functions even before any mortal. The lesson here is discipline and deference.

6.3 Practical ecological learning

Learning through participation rather than instruction is common in many instances.

Seasonal Calendar: Timing of seasons gives cues as to what should be expected from the land. While Dhutra Gad worship takes place in the cool and dry months of January, worship of Bhoidihi's *Andhari Puja* takes place in the month of *Kartik* when the monsoons have ended and harvest is just around the corner. Alongside elders, the children learn about associating seasons with activities and blossoming, fruits, and things that can be gathered. Association with minor forest produce like *mahua*, sal leaves, and *kendu* leaves is typical of the area.

Materials used; In the case of *Demul*, the *Kalo*(priest) and his wife gather *mandara* flowers, incense, lamp, arua rice which is dried under the sun, coconut, vermilion, a wick, and *lia jugador* (puffed rice *laddu).* Information regarding what needs to be gathered and what is learned during the process itself, and information regarding selection of the black or maroon goat.

6.4 Social learning: festival, kinship and collective memory

Hereditary positions and succession: The position of the Kalo is a hereditary one, and the son of the priest studies along with him for years. If he denies for serious reasons, a competent person in the village is chosen, indicating that ritual expertise is considered crucial for the security of the village.

Collective organization: *Demul* is run on the basis of contributions from households. The *Kalo* is given land by the village and is offered rice, lentils, money, and other things during festivals. Non-resident landowners are also asked for contributions since they are considered *praja* of the village. This redistribution and gathering of resources fosters deliberation, accountability, and cooperation and helps define belonging to the land and obligations. For the groves managed by the village council or the *Gram Sabha*, participation is an apprenticeship in local politics.

Commensality: In Bhoidihi, the priest gives lunch to everybody, which is seen as a blessing of *Andhari Devi*. In *Demul*, the goat is cooked as a feast for the male villagers and subjects.

Exclusion: The exclusion of women from sacrifice places, and the restriction of *Demul* only to men and landholders, tells us about the lines of inclusion. Even though women perform considerable amounts of work in preparation of the sacrifices, the sacrificial site remains off-limits to women, thus uneven distribution of knowledge becomes a point to rise.

Collective Memory: Yearly repetition ensures the survival of founding myths, like that of the priest starting the Bhoidihi puja, the founding myth of *Andhari*'s name, and *Demul* being the origin of the village.



(Figure 2 During *Andhari puja*)



(Figure 4 *Andhari puja* at Bhoidihi village)

7. LEGAL AND POLICY CONTEXT

Several laws are relevant for the groves.

- The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA). The law recognizes individual and community forest rights and, crucially, CFR rights, which include the right "to protect, regenerate, conserve and manage a forest which the community traditionally protects". Traditionally managed sacred groves can potentially fall under CFR claims, and thus grant the Gram Sabha statutory control over them. This is something the author needs to look into in relation to Jharsuguda district.
- Biological Diversity Act, 2002. It includes the provision for formation of Biodiversity Management Committees at the local level and People's Biodiversity Registers, which can

include traditional knowledge, and the declaration of sacred groves as biodiversity heritage sites.

- Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act, 2002. Community reserves have been included as a type of reserve, which can be declared in community or private lands, where the communities agree voluntarily to conserve wild animals and their habitat. It has been considered as one option for formalizing the groves.

8. CONCLUSION

The sacred groves of the Gond of Jharsuguda should not be viewed as something left over from the past, but as living institutions in which cosmology, ethics, practical ecology and social organization are learned as an integrated whole. Such learning is the strength of the groves but is also the weakness, in that when a community loses the opportunities, language and social context in which the grove is learned, belief can weaken even when the groves are still present. On the other hand, the adaptability, assertiveness and new appreciation of their own knowledge by communities demonstrate that this is not simply a matter of decline.

For academics, the idea of eco-religious learning provides an opportunity for linking conservation biology, religion, and education. For policymakers and educators, it means that the protection of the grove is linked to the protection of the conditions under which learning occurs – such as land ownership, language, rituals, participation of the young and old, and control over knowledge by the community itself.

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