

## Veneration of a Deity by Restoration of Sacred Grove in a Village Minar, Kumaun Region of Uttarakhand: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** *Golu Devta* is a famous deity of Kumaun region of Uttarakhand, which is being worshipped by the locals. It is believed that this deity resides in the forests; however, these days due to heavy anthropogenic pressure viz. lopping, grazing, collection of Non-Timber Forest Produce and subsequent loss of forest area, the deity seems to be losing ground to the evils of development. The local religious custom, however, protects part of the forests, where this deity resides and is worshipped. In this context, it becomes necessary to document the abode as Sacred Grove. The article impregnates and enlightens as to how a religious custom restores and preserves an area as Sacred Grove and brings people of different opinion and status in one platform. It discusses the views of some locals about the sanctity of the place and its environmental usefulness. Most of the people are unaware regarding the ecological benefits of the Sacred Groves and feel that wherever this deity rests, the place itself becomes sacred and the trees are protected and thrive. Cutting of the trees inside the groves is taboo and prohibited, even climbing on the trees is said to be avenged by the deity. The villagers believe that once the deity is established the conservation of the forest in that area is automatic and natural due to the blessings of the deity. This is an indigenous means of conserving the nature. To restore these traditional customs is to restore the biodiversity. At a time when the number of groves is declining due to modernization, urbanization and expansion of market economy, the restoration of a sacred grove indicates the attitude and behavior of community towards the environment is commendable and must be backed by all means possible, financial and administrative. [The Journal of American Science. 2007;3(2):45-49]. (ISSN: 1545-1003).

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### Introduction

In India one can see an intentional creation of sacred places comprising Sacred Groves (SGs) and pools. After their creation, they are maintained by the local people. These groves sanctify the vegetation of the area already existing there, or planted at the time of creation of the grove (Gadgil & Vertak 1976, Kosambi 1962) had stated that holy groves of India are so important to Indian life and this institute is very ancient, before humans had settled down and raised livestock and arable land. Sanctity of a place as sacred grove is older than awareness of man for ecosystem. When the burning problem of biodiversity conservation is discussed about, sacred grove which is an indigenous mean of conservation should not be kept untouched (Arora 2006). It has been emphasized as the role of a culture and religion towards environment (Dwivedi & Tiwari 1987; Banwari 1992; Gottlieb 1997). It is a folk conservationist strategy which should be revived as social forestry programme by the Government (Gadgil 1975; Gadgil & Guha 1995; Rangrajan 1996; Kothari et al. 1998; Ramakrishnan et al. 1998). The concept of sacred landscapes shows that man is an integral part of the nature.

Sacred groves of other states are well studied and documented. Malhotra et al. (2001) have studied cultural and ecological dimensions of sacred groves, but the SGs of Uttarakhand are mentioned in brief and are to be studied carefully, as not only tribal but the common man is also in kin with the deity and SG. Some of the documented SGs in Uttarakhand are Bughyals, Hariyali, Debvans etc. (Sinha & Maikhuri 1998) and some of the preliminary study is conducted by Anthwal et al. (2006). The SGs in the interior places being inaccessible are less known and still untouched.

### The deity

There is a local deity commonly called *Golu/Gwal/Gwel Devta* or *Goria baba* (Plate 1 D), however, in some places known as Ghughutia Golu, Dana Golu, Minar Golu and Kalbisht in Kumaun region of Uttarakhand and has been incarnated in a number of places, such as Chamarkhan, Chitai (Plate 1 A&B), Ghorakhal (Plate 1 C) and Gairar. It is believed that the origin of this deity is from the King family of village Guralchaur in Champawat district of Kumaun, who was reverend for his justice. The deity has been incarnated in the places which are said to be divine and sacred, so can be called SGs. Interestingly, these groves have now become an integral part of local people and have witnessed rituals like marriages etc. It is said that the place where this deity dwells, becomes sacred and prosperous with greenery, so the place should be kept clean and cutting of trees and some of the sacred plants is a taboo. People take oath/vows for fulfillment of wish when there is a crisis and on the fulfillment of the wish, a he-goat is sacrificed. There is a tradition of writing letters to the deity if some one is unable to come to the temple.

As far as the antiquity of this deity is concerned, it is far more ancient than the other well known Gods and goddesses. So this sacred grove was perhaps the first temple of worship in the region. This deity is known to be "*Kul Devta/Easht Dev*" (God of a clan). Such a grove often consists of merely a glade (Plate 1) and in the midst of it is often a simple hut with a wooden idol sitting on a horse, some times merely a stone. With the modernization the tin roof is being replaced by cement roofing (see Plate ) and the idol has been changed in to marble idol in newly constructed temples. There is an altar on which animals (generally he-goat or cock) are offered in sacrifice. These SGs are under the control of a community or village, which are directly related with a community called Kumaoni, irrespective of further gradation in *Verna* (grading according to the caste system) like Brahmins (priest), Kshatriya (martial race), Vaishya (business man) and Shudra (Scheduled caste). The priesthood without an exception rests with males. Women are allowed to enter these SGs, though in some SGs in Uttarakhand and south India women are not allowed.

### Restoration of SG

Traditionally in the hills of Kumaun, some of the villages are named after the caste of the people or single caste occupies the village. The village Minar is located in Bhikiasain block of Almora district of Kumaun and resident of this village are Adhikari, which are Kshatriya. The caste is neither a tribe nor they are forest dwellers, but they retain their traditional ecological ethic by revitalizing the relic of a sacred grove that belongs to deity *Golu Devta*. The idol of deity was merely a stone (Plate 1 E), which was at the distal end of the village. Adjacent to which, few of the villagers had their own land. For the restoration of the SG, the villagers donated their land (*Bhoomi-dan*). People with their combined efforts (monetarily and physically) brought the marble idol and established the area as sacred grove (Plate 1 F). They planted some of the religious plants (Padam *Prunus cerasoides*, Peepal *Ficus religiosa*, Mango *Mangifera indica*, Banana *Musa paradisiacal*, Doob *Cynodon dactylon*), ornamental plants (Morpankhi *Thuja orientalis*, Chir pine *Pinus roxburghii*, Surai *Cupressus torulosa*) and medicinal plants (*Amla Emblica officinalis*, Tulsi *Ocimum sanctum*).

The event of incarnation of deity was celebrated with a hearty zeal by the people who belong to the village, no matter they reside in the village now or other parts of the country. Some of the people who have left the village for the better livelihood in the past still have roots in the village, which shows their ecophilic and biophilic nature. The ceremony started with the carrying of idol from the road head to village in the form of procession, in which every one in the village participated (Plate 1 G-J). The incarnation was performed by enchanting *Mantras* by the priest and the event culminated with the feast.

### Ecological ethic

The people gathered there were interviewed, most of them (coming from far off places) were aware of benefits of biodiversity conservation through SGs. The people living in the village were of opinion that the revitalization of the deity will bring greenery and prosperity to the village. Some of the aged residents even said that the trees which were planted will protect the future generation from environmental catastrophe.

### Threats

Some of the SGs of the deity in various places have been mentioned in Table 1. The SGs are mainly in the oak and chir pine forest belt of the region and they occupy very limited area. Oak being a most preferred species is used for fodder, fuel wood and various other purposes by the local inhabitants, while

chir pine is used as timber and resin tapping. The excessive extraction of these materials is causing a threat to the forests. Oak forest is a good soil binder and has good water retention capacity, however, the lopping and collection of dried leaves for cattle sheds invites the pine to invade, which is a serious threat to oak forest (Singh et al. 1984; Khoshoo 1994). Due to grazing the regeneration of oak is affected, as the acorns are consumed by the goats. Heavy influx of tourist though provides revenue to the system, but at the same time polluting the environment by the use of non-biodegradable articles, heavy movement of vehicles as well as disturbing the serenity and sanctity of the grove and adjacent area.

### Nurturing the ecological ethos

The indigenous practice of biodiversity conservation should be nurtured in the cradle of sacred groves. As this practice involve the sentiments as well as ethnic sense of local inhabitants. Implementation of one simple programme of reviving the SG will be a big step towards biodiversity conservation, as without involving local people any conservation strategy is worthless. Being a well recognized fact that nature and its rich biodiversity is still supported and maintained by a diversity of ecosystem people (not necessarily tribal or forest dwellers). These customs and traditions should be given impetus by all means like intervention of Government through finance and administration.

Uttarakhand's nerve centre lies in the villages, any state's conservation strategy aiming to maintain the biodiversity needs to understand the religious and economic locus of the village, represented by the sacred grove. The plants in the sacred groves whether they have been planted (at the time of revitalization of the SG) or previously existed have been visualized with very high intrinsic value up to the extent of being divine. Any one from the crowd may be an ecosystem person provided, its culture and tradition should be ecophilic. Such a tradition of maintaining and revitalizing sacred places teaches "*To love the nature is to love the God, and to serve the nature is to serve the God*".

Table 1. The location of various sacred groves of the same deity in Kumaun, Uttarakhand

Location	Surrounding forest	Area (ca)	Threats
Chamarkhan	Chir pine ( <i>Pinus roxburghii</i> )	<0.5 ha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• grazing close to SG</li> </ul>
Ghorakhal	Banj oak ( <i>Quercus leucotrichophora</i> )	0.5 ha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• heavy tourist influx</li> <li>• encroachment of land by locals for shops</li> </ul>
Chitai	Chir pine ( <i>Pinus roxburghii</i> )	0.5 ha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• heavy local influx</li> <li>• collection of fuel wood from adjacent forest</li> <li>• conversion of temporary shops in to modern shops</li> </ul>
Gairar	Chir pine ( <i>Pinus roxburghii</i> )	<0.5 ha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• grazing close to SG</li> </ul>

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Plate 1: A & B. Old and renovated SGs of the deity in Chitai, Almora; C. SG of the deity in Ghorakhal, Nainital; D. Marble idol of the deity 'Golu Devta'; E & F. Old and restored grove of the deity in village Minar; G & H. Procession of the deity for incarnation involving men and women folk; I. Performing *Yagna*; and J. Feast.

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