

## A novel initiative to conserve 'Devrais' in Western Ghats

Since times immemorial, 'Devrais' or 'sacred groves' in Maharashtra's Western Ghats have been nurtured by local communities residing there, who draw upon traditional knowledge to conserve these patches of forestland.

However, steadily eroding ties to nature and rising urban migration among the younger generation in these communities have led to a decline in awareness about the importance of preserving these groves.

Now, a city-based environmental NGO has come up with a unique initiative to comprehensively document these 'green islands' in a bid to conserve this rich and vital habitat in the Western Ghats - one of the 34 globally important biodiversity hotspots.

Biospheres, in collaboration with the State Forest Department, plans to assess the flora and fauna using drone cameras and other audio-visual media in a bid to sensitise policy makers and increase awareness among the urban populace about the importance of conserving these shrinking habitats.

"In the past, local people evolved a corpus of laws and traditions based on ancient practice, which helped conserve these habitats. But the dawn of modernity has led to a drastic change in the traditional mindset of worshipping nature and regarding the grove and deity sacrosanct," said Dr. Sachin Puneekar, founder-president of Biospheres.

The larger objective of the 'Devrai' conservation project is not only to encourage local communities to carry their traditions forward, but to document regional deities in what proposes to be a socio-cultural assessment.

### Data on groves

As a starting point, data on sacred groves is already being collected in the Bhimashankar Wildlife sanctuary, informs Dr. Puneekar.

Studies on 'Devrais', in the form of scholarly articles and research papers, have been carried out since the early 1950s, with pioneering work by ecologist Madhav Gadgil and botanist V.D. Vartak in the 1970s.

Sacred groves of the Western Ghats are shrinking, and their deities being Sanskritised

Maharashtra has about 4,000 such groves, with 300 of these lying in Pune district scattered across verdant spots in Tamhini ghat.

The word 'Devrai' is a compound of *Dev* meaning 'God' and 'Rai' meaning forest. The groves are often a rich source of rare fruits and plants. "A 'sacred grove' can range from a few trees to several hundred trees in a cluster. The precise amount of green cover entailed by these 'green islands' needs to be assessed. So, this quantification is one part of the project," said Dr. Puneekar.

Traditionally, a village was sited around a 'sacred grove' and its deity, providing worship and resource extraction to the residents. Today, these groves stare in the face of ecological perils like habitat shrinkage, with rampant illegal tree felling in the ghat areas.

"There is no legislation to preserve these once-remote green areas. Further, the Forest

Department needs to provide a suitable manforce to safeguard these clusters,” he said.

Delineating their importance, Dr. Punekar notes the richness of the ‘Devrais’ in medicinal plants

“These groves function as a veritable nursery offering ideal opportunities for germplasm evaluation. The clusters in Pune district are endowed with such rare plants as Narkya (*Mappia foetida*), economically important plants as wild nutmeg and black pepper, and wild edibles like wild litchi to name just a few,” he says.

“The data collected with the help of drones can help pinpoint the deforested areas near the groves, help us gauge the rate at which these habitats are shrinking,” says Nivedita Joshi, a wildlife enthusiast and a filmmaker, who is working on this project.

These groves play a crucial role in regenerating the water table as they happen to be the source of a number of rivers, streams and rivulets in the district.

The Ghod River, which originates in the ‘sacred grove’ at Aahupe village in Bhimashankar is just one instance, says Dr. Punekar.

The possibilities of ecological regeneration are immense: A potential green corridor can be created by linking these islands with forests, thereby abetting in the easy migration of fauna.

“The behaviour of several animals like the Giant squirrel – the wildlife emblem of Maharashtra – can be studied if these habitats are conserved,” says Ms. Joshi, adding that the project strives to imbibe a spirit of conservation among people.

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