

DEV VANS: A CULTURAL DEVICE TO CONSERVE ECOLOGY IN UTTARANCHAL

Girija Pande

Department of History, Kumaun University,
Nainital 263001

The life of the local hilly people is closely linked to their ambient environment. For the mountain people the environment is part of their being. They depend upon local flora and fauna for their living, but it's a symbiotic relationship. They realise that preserving the environment is essential for their survival too. The micro-variations of the ambient harsh environment have been responsible for the rich community knowledge systems and a biodiversity necessary for sustainability of human life here. Therefore, such groups, especially in the hills, have evolved several conservation practices. The institution of sacred forests or groves is ancient and was once widespread. The nurturing of sacred forests (*Dev Van*) is one such practice. In this tradition, local communities dedicate patches of forests to their local deities or ancestral spirits. Local communities protect such groves usually through customary taboos and sanctions. The socio-religious and cultural element that provokes and influences the human psyche to conserve nature is a peculiar feature of this practice. A sacred grove may consist of many species, a clump of trees belonging to one species or even a single old tree depending on the history of vegetation, importance of the tree species and local culture. The nurturing of sacred forests (*Dev Van*) is one such practice. In this tradition, local communities dedicate patches of forests to their local deities or ancestral spirits. Local communities protect such groves usually through customary taboos and sanctions. The socio-religious and cultural element that provokes and influences the human psyche to conserve nature is a peculiar feature of this practice. A sacred grove may consist of many species, a clump of trees belonging to one species or even a single old tree depending on the history of vegetation, importance of the tree species and local culture.

In India, the tradition of sacred forests is quite old, and may have originated among the hunting-gathering communities, much before humans started settled agriculture. Nevertheless, this tradition has undergone considerable modifications and complexities over a period of time. Over 50,000 sacred groves have so far been reported from different parts of the country (*Sacred Groves of India*, IGRMS Publication, 2000). These sacred forests are owned, managed and named differently in different parts of India. There are case studies on Kerala, Maharastra, Rajasthan and the north east, which deal with sacred groves at

length. National Museum of Man (IGRMS), Bhopal, has extensively documented the sacred groves of India and has mounted an exhibition.

In Uttaranchal too, there is a rich tradition of conservation of natural resources through customary methods. Here the sacred forests are known as *Dev Vans*, which are examples of participatory management. The *Dev Vans* spread across the state are of immense importance and exhibit a broad typology and socio-religious mechanism of regulating the use and conservation of resources. The attitude towards conservation of vegetation or trees around water springs, temple premises and in resting places, etc. is common in folk wisdom. The *Dev Vans* in the villages such as Martoli, Dharamghar, Pankhu, Madigaon, Baram, Chudhiyar, Chitgul, Bhama, Baram, Jaurasi (in Kumaon) and Paabo, Nandisain, Kote, Tareshwar, Dewal, Haryli Devi (in Garhwal) are some of the magnificent examples of deep ecological insight of the traditional societies and their conservation practices. The *Dev Vans* are dedicated either to goddess *Nanda, Hariyaji, Kotgari, Aeri, Kanardevi, Kalika, Kokila, Chamunda* or to a male deity like *Haru Saim, Gangnath, Chaumu*, etc. It appears that unlike other parts of India where amid plenty of forests the need for sacred groves is entwined with man's desire to worship nature or wilderness, in Uttaranchal, besides nature worshipping the need for sacred (religious) element in conservation seems to be associated with a resource crisis. It is observed that generally the forest patches where the biotic pressure is severe or those forests, which are victims of over exploitation, are offered to the deity. One such example is Shyahi Devi forest in Almora, which was recently offered to the goddess for conservation. While offering the forest, the community first holds a meeting to decide how much area has to be offered and what type of sanction is to be imposed. The rituals related to the deity follow it. It is worth noticing, why *Dev Vans* are offered to certain deities? In fact, such deities have a significant place in the socio-religious life of the local people and the fear of these deities prevails among the villagers, which prevents them from entering the forest to destroy it. Untimely death, epidemic, famine, wild animal attack, etc. are considered as the deity's curse if the sanction is violated. The nature of this fear can easily be conveyed through popular folk tales. These stories significantly emphasise the socio-cultural and religious elements of fear through which these forests were being guarded. This also reveals how a community imposes ban on itself and how the fear of a deity compels them to follow the simple thumb rule to conserve the dedicated forest or even a single tree. Ecologically *Dev Vans* are ecosystems themselves as they perform all ecological functions, nutrient cycling, water recharging, conservation of biodiversity, prevention of soil erosion, and in mountain areas often prevent even land slides. They also harbour many key species. *Dev Vans* not only contribute to the green cover, they also help conserve biodiversity without any financial burden on the communities. Now the ecologists have also started appreciating these resource management methods of traditional societies.

Today, the main challenge before us in the Himalayas is to conserve the rich vegetation wealth and maintain ecological balance using human skills and traditional wisdom in an ethical way. Forests in the populated zone of mountains

are facing immense anthropogenic pressure (lopping for fuel wood and fodder, grazing, illegal harvesting for timber, forest fires, etc) for subsistence living. Degradation of forests in many places has reached a stage from where recovery is difficult. In our country where forests sustain the livelihood of 500 million people who live in and around forests, managing forests is an extraordinary task, particularly in the Himalayan region. In such situations lessons can be learnt and strategies can be evolved from folk wisdom to help conserve nature.

The mountain people through observation have evolved several such models and strategies to conserve nature. The practice of *Dev Vans* in Uttaranchal is one among them, which needs further study and support.