



RESEARCH ARTICLE

RELIGIOUS NORM AND TRADITIONAL PRACTICES - A STEP TOWARD CONSERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY BY BHOTIA TRIBE OF JOHAR VALLEY, PITHORAGARH, UTTARAKHAND, (INDIA)

***Anju Joshi and Neeta Pande**

M.B. Govt. P.G. College, Haldwani, Kumaun University Nainital, Uttarakhand, India

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ABSTRACT

The indigenous people of Kumaun region of Uttarakhand, (India) have always played a significant role in conserving the biodiversity. Traditional and cultural forms of biodiversity conservation practices still exist among these societies, such as sacred groves, sacred species and sacred landscapes. The indigenous people have developed their norms and rules through myths and folklores which prove that they are aware of significance of forest and biodiversity in their life. This folklores prevent the destruction of sacred and important flora. The present study reveals the role of Johari Shauka (Bhotia indigenous group) residing in Johar valley (Munsiyari) Pithoragarh district of Kumaun in conservation of the biodiversity in and around localities of their natural habitat.

INTRODUCTION

India has a rich history and diversity of community conserved areas. There are thousands of examples nationwide. These range from sacred groves and landscapes protected for centuries, for regenerating and protecting forests. Tribal communities conserved forest, grassland, wildlife populations and their environment for a variety of reasons which provide immense socio-economic and ecological, benefits, including the conservation of threatened species and livelihood security for communities. The indigenous people of Kumaun region of Uttarakhand have always played a significant role in conserving the biodiversity. Johari Shauka (Bhotia tribe) is inhabitant of Johar Valley, located along the Gori Ganga river in Munsiyari block of pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, India. The valley used to be a major trade route with Tibet. Traditional and cultural forms of biodiversity conservation practices still exist among these societies. Joshi, A. and Pande, N. (2016) worked on indigenous practices used by Bhotia inhabitant of Kumaun. Some of the sacred groves in Uttarakhand are reported earlier such as Bughyals, Hariyali, Debvans etc. (Anthwal *et al.*, 2000). In Pithoragarh district, the work is documentd by various worker on sacred groves including Thal, Kedhar, Haat Kali, Nakuleshwar, Chandika and Vaishneo Devi (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2009; Singh *et al.*, 2010; Negi, 2005).

***Corresponding author: Anju Joshi,**

M.B. Govt. P.G. College, Haldwani, Kumaun University Nainital, Uttarakhand, India.

The present work is carried out to document the sacred grove in Johar valley of Pithoragarh district, Uttarakhand.

STUDY AREA

Johar Valley, located along the Gori Ganga river in Munsiyari block of pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, India. It lies at the base of the great Himalayan mountain range, at an elevation of about 7,200 ft. The town is surrounded by snow-capped peaks.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Present study is based on extensive and intensive surveys made during 20014-15. The tribal people have more close relations with plant resources for their survival. Through proper survey and interaction with tribal people the relevant information are collected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The tribes have enriched the conservation ethics through their traditional wisdom and religious beliefs. The natural resources like forests and alpine meadows are worshipped as the God and Goddess by tribal people where annual rituals and ceremonies are performed to propitiate the deity, ancestral spirits and totems etc. In Johar valley of Pithoragarh district, sacred forests still exists. These groves are associated with a presiding deity, e.g. *Kalamuni* (in the name of goddess *Kali*) forest, *Thamri Kund*, *Maiser Kund*, *Dana dhar*, *Kalia top*, *Martoli* temple etc.

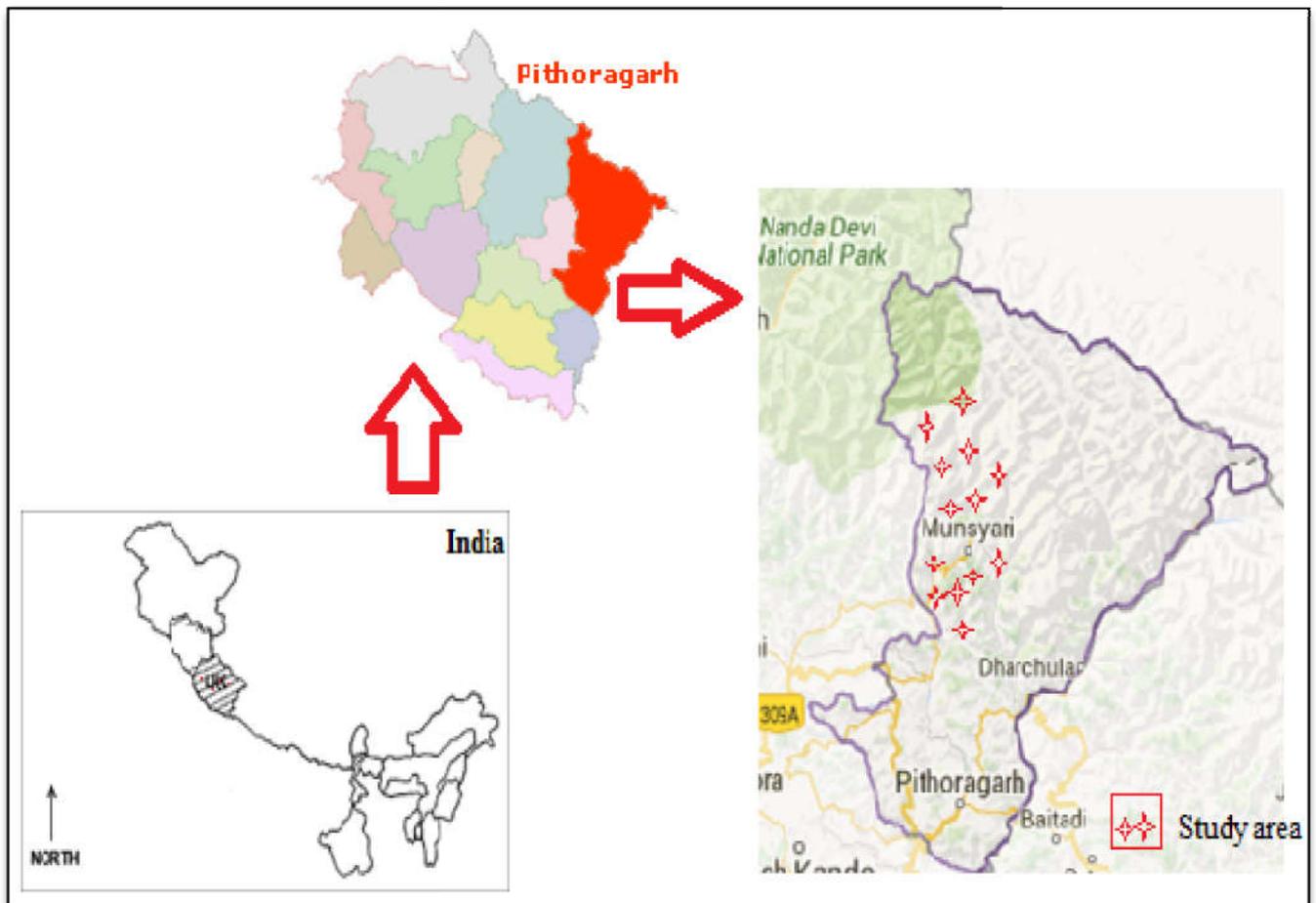


Fig.1. Map showing study area



a. Nanda Devi Temple, Martoli Munsyari
 b. Thamri Kund, Munsyari
 c. Dana Dhar, Munsyari
 d. Jaghu Nath Temple, Munsyari
 e. Naula Devta temple, Munsyari

Fig.2. Sacred place of Munsyari

Table 1. Some sacred plants species used by Johari's, of Pithoragarh district, Kumaun, Uttarakhand (India)

Botanical name	Vernacular name	Family
<i>Cupressus torulosa</i> D.Don	Raga	Cupressaceae
<i>Betula utilis</i> D.Don	Bhojpatra	Betulaceae
<i>Nardostachys grandiflora</i> DC.	Jatamaasi	Valerianaceae
<i>Saussurea obvallata</i> (DC.) Edgew.	Braham Kamal	Asteraceae
<i>Cynodon dactylon</i> (L.) Pers.	Doop	Poaceae
<i>Musa balbisiana</i> Colla	Kela	Musaceae
<i>Ficus auriculata</i> Lour.	Timal	Moraceae.
<i>Cannabis sativa</i> L.	Bhang	Cannabaceae
<i>Brassica rapa</i> L.	Sarson	Brassicaceae
<i>Ocimum tenuiflorum</i> L.	Tulsi	Lamiaceae
<i>Artemisia parviflora</i> Roxb. ex. D.Don	Patti	Asteraceae
<i>Saccharum spontaneum</i> L.	Kush	Moraceae
<i>Datura stramonium</i> L.	Datura	Solanaceae
<i>Prunus cerasoides</i> Buch.-Ham. ex D.Don	Payaa	Rosaceae

in Munsyari where hunting and logging are strictly prohibited by local communities. In these areas social gatherings take place on the occasion of festivals and religious ceremonies. In *Thamri Kund* and *Maiser Kund* of tribal areas the entry of woman is also strictly prohibited. The sacred patches of *Cedrus deodar* are surrounded by *Quercus* species. These sacred groves are the best repository of ethno-medicinally important plants, also consists of many rare, endangered and threatened species. In Munsyari block of Pithoragarh district, the upper Johar Valley is declared as part of the buffer zone of the *Nanda Devi* Biosphere Reserve in 1988 under UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Program (MAB) to protect the area's biological and cultural diversity. The conservation of plants by tribal communities of Pithoragarh district is done in different ways including harvesting restraint, protection or propagation of resources species, duration of harvests, avoidances of harmful habitat modification, sacred natural sites and taboo system etc. In Munsyari block (locality of Bhotia tribal community) in Pithoragarh district, the *Bhujani* located above the village *Martoli*, is believed to be the resident of deity and the villagers would not dare to enter inside the forest. They enter in the forest only on the occasion or festival such as annual festival of *Aalam Sammo* to get stem of *Cupressus torulosa* D.Don or *Betula utilis* D.Don. This forest is an example of sacred forest protected by Bhotia communities of *Martoli* village. Another example is during the festival of *Nandaastmi* only two souls from the entire village are selected in *Johar* valley who are allowed to collect the *Brahamkamal* from *salangwar* (a sacred alpine pasture) where the species is found. In this important festival of *Nandaastmi* the indigenous people also convey the message that only the fully mature flowers after shedding their seeds should be harvested.

This is the evidence of effective means to restrict ill conceived harvest. Some other sacred plants species in tribal areas of Pithoragarh district are enlisted in Table 1.

CONCLUSION

Maintaining sacred groves are religious practice of conserving biodiversity with strong beliefs, customs and taboos. Besides that sacred groves are treasure house of rare and endemic species. Everything within these groves is under the protection of the reigning deity of the grove and the removal of any material, even dead wood or twig is a taboo. Preservation of these groves through religious beliefs is also useful for conserving germplasm that is otherwise under threat due to anthropogenic activities. Sacred groves still exist in many parts of Kumaun region of Uttarakhand reflect the vegetation of any locality preserved in its original form with minimal disturbance.

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