

## First mission to save 'sacred groves' in 30 years

Samrat Phadnis, TNN | Sep 3, 2015

KOLHAPUR: For the first time in last 30 odd years, experts have started revisiting Maharashtra's unique treasure, 'sacred groves,' locally called as Devrai, for the documentation and analysis of their present situation.

In their maiden attempt, the experts have listed out 38 sacred groves in Satara district alone so far and expected that the figure might touch 50 by the end of the month as some of forests, which were not recorded earlier are being registered for the first time.

Earlier, in 1980s eminent ecologist Madhav Gadgil and V D Vartak created first inventory of Devrai forests in Maharashtra during which they documented 233 places. The inventory evolved to 900 during another study in 1999. Since then no comprehensive study over Devrai has been held in Maharashtra. Vinaya Ghate, botanist and retired faculty of Agharkar Research Institute, Pune along with R K Adkar, retired forest official and Priti Kore, botanist have started revisiting the Devrai mentioned in the inventory and documenting the existing scenario. M K Rao, chief conservation of territorial forests, Kolhapur region, supported to the efforts and extended active participation to preserve environmental heritage. Since the project involves massive efforts, the team of three has set no deadline as of now; however aiming to visit maximum possible places; especially in Western Ghats.

Sacred groves are of vital importance since they preserve plant species which are rare, endangered and endemic. Such Devrai are considered as gene pool bank and hosts forests of few hundred years; however in last two decades rapid urbanization, tree felling activities and unwarranted beautification of the temples existed in the forests have shrink the size of Devrai.

"Devrai forests are mostly on Devsthan lands or spread over private lands. Very few of them belongs to government departments like forest and revenue. There are around 900 Devrai some 16 years back; however we have to revisit the places to know the actual condition of the forest," Ghate told TOI.

Team visited some of the places in Satara district and found that not all the forests are preserved. To their astonishment, small temples at the sacred groves were converted into two storied buildings by cutting the trees. "It is indeed sad to see such condition. The problem with the sacred groves in Maharashtra's inventory is that only one-third of the forests were visited during last listings. We have started visiting, documenting and reinventing each of the groves during which the thrust will be to register the changes occurred in the forest during the last recording," Adkar said.

Kolhapur, once home of around 200 Devrai, has less than 50% of such forests at present. Much of the land is converted into agriculture or temple has been established removing the forest. "Hardly any private Devrai exists nowadays. The extreme variety of plant species makes Devrai unique laboratory. Couple of years ago, we made a film on Devrai during which we tried to expose the threats to the system. One of the major Devrai in Shahuwadi taluka of Kolhapur was cut for the sake of temple beautification," observed Raman Kulkarni, city-based nature lover.

**Source:**

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolhapur/First-mission-to-save-sacred-groves-in-30-years/articleshow/48783868.cms>