Sacred grove relics as bird refugia

Sacred groves are patches of natural vegetation dedicated to certain local deities, from which no harvesting of living matter is permitted by the local communities. Ecologists currently recognize these sacred groves (SG) as a unique cultural institution for conserving local biodiversity. Numerous sacred groves are among the last representatives of climax vegetation in the Western Ghats and North East India, whereas SGs in other parts of the country have dwindled due to colonial land use policies and erosion of traditional values regarding natural resource use. Nevertheless, hundreds of relics of SGs exist in the tribal tracts of eastern India, and much of the tribal cultural life in West Bengal has been reported to be still centred around these relics.

The observations we report here are a fallout of an ethnobiological survey we conducted from early April to end-June, 1996 in Jamboni, Jhargram, Gidhni, Belpahari and Banspahari Forest Ranges of western Midnapore district. In conformity with our previous study, we found remnants of SG in almost every tribal village in the region. Most of these groves, locally called Jahiristan, are relics of ancient SGs, containing 10–20 trees, amidst a denuded lateritic expanse. The tree species mostly found in these relics include sal (Shorea robusta), asan (Terminalia tomentosa), karam (Ada cordifolia), banyan (Ficus bengalensis), aswath (F. religiosa), pial (Buchanania lanzan), piya-sal (Pierocerus marsupium), neem (Azadirachta indica), and mahua (Bassia latifolia). All these species are also found in sal forests, albeit mostly in reproductively immature stages.

The sal coppice forest patches in the region under study are highly degraded, and are now regenerating under community protection by villagers' Forest Protection Committees over the past
### Table 1. Habitat preference of birds in West Midnapore

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Taxa</th>
<th>Common name</th>
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<td>P. eupatria</td>
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*includes farm fields.  
+ = Sighted.

8–10 years*4.5. The average crop height of the sal copse stands is ca. 9 m, with GBH < 30 cm. However, the forest of Belpahari range is composed of a large population of old trees, with an average crop height of ca. 16 m, and GBH of 30–56 cm.

Although most of the SGs are composed of a score of old trees, the Kanak Durga temple grove at Chilika is considerably large (ca. 20 acres), within the premises of the royal estate of Chilika. This grove contains a large floral diversity, and is characterized by old-growth trees, lianas, and lichens. The canopy cover of this grove is at least as good as that of the Belpahari forest.

The survey produced, inter alia, an inventory of local birds based on direct sighting records, for which we spent an average of 3 days in each of the five ranges during the period 2 April–30 June, 1996, and the duration of sighting effort was from 9 am till 4:30 pm each day. We have also incorporated here the records of bird sightings separately made in June–July 1995 in the same area. Although a number of waterfowl (e.g. pond heron, little cormorant, red wattled lapwing, stone curlew, little egret, cattle egret, white-breasted waterhen, etc.) and migratory land birds (e.g. brown shrike) were recorded, we confine our discussion here to the resident land birds alone. A total of 42 species of resident land birds occur in the region studied. The birds were sighted in the sal forests, SGs, farm fields and vegetations in the settlements (Table 1). Since the original objective of the survey did not concern primarily with avian diversity estimation in SGs, the records of bird occurrences are inadequate for statistical quantification and generalizations. Nevertheless, the data presented here may serve to indicate the apparent habitat preference of the birds with some overlaps. Table 1 shows that 22 land birds are found in the SGs, four of which are occasionally also sighted in the sal forest. The spotted dove was the only species that was found in all the three kinds of habitats. Ten species of birds were found only in sal forests and another 9 in both the sal forest and the settlement area, but not in SGs. A total of 19 birds were recorded to occur outside the sal forests; of these, 14 were found in SGs and human habitations,
and at least four species (yellow-legged green pigeon, purple-rumped sunbird, coppersmith and large Indian parakeet) were found only in the SGs. The house sparrow was found only in the human settlement area.

It seems plausible that the unavailability of sufficient quantum of fruits and the poor canopy structure in the regenerating sal forests fail to provide attractive foraging and nesting habitats for the birds occurring outside the sal forest. However, the Belpahari and Banspahari forests contain a good proportion of mature trees with well-developed canopy, yet only 3 out of the 21 birds recorded from SGs were sighted in these forests. The socio-religious girdle of taboos around the SGs prohibiting trapping and hunting of animals, seems to be the only explanation for the 18 birds occurring in the SGs, and not in the sal forests.

An important support to our conjecture that habitat protection is the primary reason for the bird’s preference of the SGs, was lent by the local tribal hunters reporting that many birds that are hunted for meat (e.g. magpie robin, coppersmith, orioles, myna and parakeets) tend to nest in the Kanak Durga temple grove and other SGs. We could not verify these reportings, but were able to notice a small number of nests of the Indian myna and the black-headed oriole in three different SGs in Jhargram, Banspahari and Belpahari Ranges. An old (abandoned) nest of the weaver bird was also sighted on a palm tree in a derelict SG in Jamboni Range.

Further intensive studies are required to consolidate our findings. Nevertheless, assuming that the probability of sighting a bird species was equal in all three habitats categorized in Table 1, the record of 22 local landbirds from the SGs suggests that these groves served as important sanctuaries for numerous biota in the past when they were of bigger physical dimensions. While it is unknown how many species of other groups of organisms were, or still are, protected by the institution of SG, this study indicates that these dwindling SGs continue to serve as important refuges amidst the landscape of species depletion. The function of SG in providing refuge to a variety of life forms has been appreciated by ecologists, but most studies in SG biodiversity have encompassed little more than floral inventories, thus leaving a considerable gap in the documentation of faunal diversity in SGs. Our qualitative data herein underscores the need for a rigorous study of the current ecological function of the existing SGs. Furthermore, this study reveals the efficacy of tradition in maintaining biodiversity in the face of continuing onslaught of the ‘mainstream’ economy on the indigenous cultural heritage.


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Debal Deb
Kaushik Deuti
K. C. Malhotra

1Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies, 9 Old Calcutta Road, Talipukur, Barrackpore 743 187, India and Centre for Environment and Development, 329, Jodipur Park, Calcutta 700 068, India
2Nature Environment and Wildlife Society, 10 Chowringhee Terrace, Calcutta 700 020, India
3Biological Science Division, Indian Statistical Institute, 203 B.T. Road, Calcutta 700 035, India