

## Competitive Exams Essay: Forests to Tribal's as Water to Fishes

India is a land of diverse Natural resources. It is also a country with the strongest traditions of nature conservation anywhere in the world. It is true that India has suffered an almost unabated devastation of its natural biological heritage and much of what remains has been preserved through the ages because of a wealth of conservation-oriented cultural and religious traditions. One such significant tradition of nature conservation is that of dedicating patches of forest to some deity by the tribal people. In fact, the tribal techniques are basically conservation-oriented, it is the contact with modern civilization that has been marring this ethics.

The tribal ethics of forest conservation stems from the fundamental facts of their own existence. The dependence of tribals on forests is maximum and their long-term interest lies in protection and not in destroying forests. Someone has said Forests to 'adivasis tribals' as water to 'fishes' The tribal cultural heritages are shaped and maintained through a symbiotic relationship with forests. Based on the age-old perception of the surrounding vegetation, they demarcate plants as useful and un-useful, medicinal c. 1 non-medicinal, ritualistic and non-ritualistic, edible and interact with them accordingly. In addition to providing the daily amenities of life, the forests also satisfy their deep-rooted sentiments. Their folklore revolves around the forests. Their sentiments, Their folklore revolves around the forests. Their way of life is intimately connected with forests right from birth to death. In the time of distress forests are their last succor.

Shifting agriculture on the hill slopes is perhaps one of the major anti-ecological practices in today's context that can be cited against the tribes. It is the most ancient form of subsistence pattern involving slash and burn of forest, followed by mixed cropping over the burnt area for a year or two and then leaving the nutrient depleted land fallow for natural regeneration to get it recuperated of soil fertility; moving to another field and eventually coming back to the earlier one. When the forest-dwelling tribal population was small; the effects of small clearing in large forest areas too were small and the slash and burn cycle was long enough over 20 – 30 years to ensure the system self-sustaining. In recent times, due to increasing population and steady decline in the area available, the shifting cultivators are forced to return to the same plots and the cycle has been shortened to 4 – 5 years. Although the economy is sustainable subject to vast availability of forest lands, an increasing practice of shifting cultivation has caused serious environmental damage resulting in rapid desensitization vast tracts of land. Forests which once covered a vast area are now left only in patches.

Despite such colossal disturbances on forests, there are few pockets of undisturbed natural forests preserved on religious grounds by the local tribes as 'Sacred groves' These groves represent near-virgin vegetation preserved in 'in situ' form without any outside interference and are indicative of what forest wealth the country once harbored. All forms of life in such a grove

are under the protection of the reigning deity of that grove, and the removal of even dead wood is taboo. This preservation of the entire vegetation in association with a deity is quite a distinct phenomenon from the preservation of isolate trees like peepal. These sacred groves may range in size from a group of few trees to a forest of trees spaced over several hectares of land. Sacred groves occur in India and some other parts of Asia and Africa as well. In India they have been reported from Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Meghalaya.

Folklores play a significant role in confirming the beliefs associated with the sacred groves. Though most of the tribals are illiterate, they have scrupulously preserved their traditional customs, rituals, ceremonies and way of forest life through folk beliefs with great fervor. The tribals believe that all forms of life within the groves are afforded protection by the grace of reigning deities. These deities often called 'Mother Goddess' by the local people of the Western Ghats of Maharashtra are in fact in the form of stone lumps smeared with red lead mostly lying under tall trees. The red lead represents the blood of sacrificial victims which were no doubts humans in bygone times. Even today, the Goddess Shirkai from the neighboring grove in Pune district is symbolically offered a human victim every year.

The tribal population inhabiting Meghalaya maintains large tracts of protected forests as sacred grover. In Khasi hills there three such groves at Shillong Peak, Mawphlang and Mawamai. The Khasis believe that the sylvan spirits reign in the groves often demand sacrifices. It is a taboo for them to cut any plant or to kill anim. Ls inside the forests. The belief is that anybody deities. All forms of wildlife, especially snakes are protected there as the belief goes that a snake if killed, its dead body will breed many to kill the culprit. And the villagers seem to a respect such beliefs with great sincerity.

Sacred groves are treasure troves of genetic resources supporting myriad of plants which are either rare in the area or are becoming rare with the deforestation menace. These habitats often serve as a last refuge for arboreal birds and mammals, and no doubt other forest-loving animals as well. But is unfortunate that in the recent past, the value system permitting the nature of such environments has been eroded. As a consequence, these habitats are highly disturbed. Apart from erosion and modifications in the values, sheer economic and other considerations like shortage of fuel wood have forced the local people to encroach upon these forests. However, when forest destruction at a rapid rate-such religious practices still survive as the hope and a way of conserving the indigenous flora, and every step should be taken to protect them as a part of a system of nature reserves.