# The Nepalese context of Religious forests

**1. What are religious forests**

Religious forests are those forest sites that are controlled or owned by a religious or faith group. Such sites include commercial holdings, forests managed by communities, areas chosen for tree-planting programs and sacred forests carrying spiritual significance.[[1]](#footnote-1) These forests are a part of long-held beliefs and tradition that conserve specific land areas that have certain cultural or religious significance. These forests often provide the resources and goods used in performing religious rituals, and they are also affected by activities such as tree worship, the establishment and maintenance of sacred sites in forests, religious festivals and rituals conducted within forests, and the management of forests as productive assets by religious organizations.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In certain theologies, certain plant or trees are associated with supernatural forces, deeming them to be incarnations or symbols of such forces-and they are worshipped.[[3]](#footnote-3) Religious classification is a particularly enduring source of institutional disparity that continues to be treated as an interesting anachronism.[[4]](#footnote-4) Such religious classifications significantly impact people’s perception of forests. Religious forests serve a number of purposes in the social arrangement, firstly, the religious value which they hold helps in forming a connection between the worshipper and the divine. Secondly, they have recreational value- they attract tourists and are also visited by people for festivals. Thirdly, they have a strong educational message- to conserve and respect the forests.

The Forest Act of Nepal defines these forests as forest area that has been legally handed over to a legally registered religious groups, communities or organizations to carry out and continue traditional religious activities by sustainably utilizing its resources as described in its management plan.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Chapter 7 of the Forest Act, 2049 (1993) deals with the provisions related to religious forests:

Section 35 of the Act says that any religious body, community or group that is desirous of developing, utilizing or conserving the National Forest of a religious place or the area surrounding it has the right to do so by way of submitting an application. On the receipt of such application, the District Forest Officer shall make the enquiries and hand over the forest to the desirous body, with necessary changes. Such arrangement must ensure that the rights of the traditional users are protected.

Section 36 of the act deals with the operation of activities in such forests, and it states that the concerned body, group or community can also use the forest for religious activities. However, the activities must be conducted in a manner so as to ensure that the felling of trees does not cause any significant adverse effects.

Section 37 of the act gives an authority to the District Forest Officer to take back such religious forests in case the operations carried out in these forests do not comply with the provisions given under this act or rules framed thereunder. The section also provides for giving a reasonable opportunity to submit clarifications in such cases. In case the religious body, group or community is not satisfied with the decision made by the District Forest Officer, they may file a complaint with the Regional Forest Director, and the decision made by him will be final.

**2. What are sacred groves?**

Sacred Groves are those patches of trees which are associated with or given a certain religious identity. These forest lands are thus protected by way of religious zeal or connotations.[[6]](#footnote-6) They are given a pious status and are left untouched because of social fencing by local people.[[7]](#footnote-7) These groves hold special importance in certain cultures because of their religious faiths. These patches of forests are treated as sacrosanct, and they carry with themselves a certain legacy.[[8]](#footnote-8) In Nepal, Lumbini Grove[[9]](#footnote-9) holds special importance as it is believed to be the place where Gautam Buddha was born. It is a Buddhist pilgrimage and holds the status of a World Heritage Site, which is granted by UNESCO.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Sacred groves are a stellar example of traditional forest management. They are protected by the local inhabitants or tribes, thereby limiting human access to these parts of the forests. While the trees may be used for religious or medicinal purposes, it is ensured that there is no harm done to these trees, they are protected from felling, and their resident creatures are not killed, thereby leaving them in their natural state.[[11]](#footnote-11) These groves are also an example of how the conservation of nature and natural resources has been an important part of our culture. Since they possess a religious identity, they connect with the local communities by way of spiritual relationship. They manifest the ecological ethos of these local communities[[12]](#footnote-12)

Many faiths regard nature as imbued with sacred value.[[13]](#footnote-13) Based on their indigenous culture and religious beliefs, local communities in Nepal have protected some patches of forests that are rich in biodiversity and have certain faith associated with them. By managing and protecting these forests, it is ensured that they are conserved. This very system of conservation of sacred groves plays a very important role in the conservation of plant biodiversity[[14]](#footnote-14) , and it also helps in protecting indigenous varieties of trees. Often, the local communities are dependent on these sacred groves for resources, and they are also home to a variety of plant and animal species.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**3. What is the reason behind the creation of this term, religious forest?**

The common Nepali spoken name for religious or sacred forests is *pabitraban* or *dharmikban*. It can be said that the concept of religious forests evolved because of the religious beliefs and practices on forest conservation. In these forests, management is associated with the performance of religious rituals or purposes. In Nepal, there is a majority of the population that associates itself with Hinduism or Buddhism, and both of these religions depict the world as being inhabited by supernatural beings,[[16]](#footnote-16) which also includes the forces of nature.[[17]](#footnote-17) These societies relate the elements of the environment with the supernatural world and use them to give explanations for the natural processes.[[18]](#footnote-18) Religious classifications have a pervasive and powerful effect on how people perceive, allocate, and use forests.[[19]](#footnote-19)

There are two views that can be taken into account for the creation of these religious forests. The first places a higher importance to the spiritual world whereas the second promotes the conservation of the environment. The Hinduism and Buddhism give special importance to the worship of nature, which includes the plants, animals and most other elements. The trees hold a significant value in many aspects, they provide shelter to different species and they are also an essential source for the livelihood of the local communities. They serve manifold purposes, having medicinal value, providing timber and food. The conservation ethic also finds its place in the religious practice. The forests or the trees were given the status of divinity so as to protect them from felling or being destroyed. The local communities, driven by their faith, would ensure the protection of such forests or trees which had religious affiliations. There are also a number of ritual which take place within the forests.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The conservation ethic in the religious practices, the rituals such as tree worship, tree planting, the protection of forests containing sacred sites and the social structures have led to the concept of religious forests. These forests provide for landscapes which can be used to worship supernatural beings. Often, they are facilitated by way of construction of temple or paths. By way of these religious forests, the value of conservation which is often embodied in our religions is promoted.

**4. Religious Forests in the Capital City of Kathmandu**

Given the few scant forests left in the city of Kathmandu, the religious forests have a very important role to play- they are a part of the very little green cover that is left in the city.[[21]](#footnote-21) One of these is the Nilbarahi forest in Bhaktapur, which is the home to Tantric Goddess Nilbarahi.[[22]](#footnote-22) The Dakshinkali grove is devoted to Goddess Kali, and the Seshnarayan pond located within it are worshipped by the people in the neighbouring districts. Another one is the Sleshmantak forest along the Bagmati River near Pashupati Temple. According to the legends, Shiva found the Kathmandu valley and came to live there disguised as a buck. Skanda Puran describes how he spent his time in the Sleshmantak and reads- “As I reside here in Sleshmantak, I will hence be known as Pashupati (lord of animals).”[[23]](#footnote-23) These forests are also known as Mrigasthali, the abode of deers.

These forests or groves are usually protected by the local indigenous communities. The local people have evolved their own ways and rules of managing these forests and these forests have been relatively intact owing to the religious sentiments of the people.[[24]](#footnote-24) These forests or groves are generally managed by the local communities without any external help.[[25]](#footnote-25) Even in the case of Nepal, those communities or organizations who want a certain forest area to be converted to a religious forest have to take an initiative to make an application for the same. Post the acceptance of such application, the management of the forest would be controlled or looked after by the people of the community or the organization. The powers or the responsibilities given to the state management are not very elaborate, but they include the authority to grant such status to a forest and the authority to take back the same in case the provisions of the forest act are not complied with.

Sacred groves have been given considerable attention in Nepal which can be inferred from how the Forest Act of Nepal identifies and categorizes religious forests. However, of late, these forests are under threat and are losing their biodiversity. The 2013 Statistics of the Forest Department highlights that there are only 36 sacred groves registered across a span of 2056 hectares[[26]](#footnote-26) which indicates that there is still a long way for religious forests and sacred groves to earn their place in the system of biodiversity conservation. The Government policies and conservation mechanisms have failed to provide adequate protection to the sacred groves and religious forests in the country. It can be said that biodiversity conservation by way of religious forests is yet to gain the due recognition that should be given to it. A lot of sacred forests in the Kathmandu Valley are small groves of trees scattered at variable distances from human settlements in nearly all parts of the valley.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The system of sacred groves and religious forests is one of the ideal methods for biodiversity conservation. These patches of forests ensure that the rare or endangered species of plants are well protected. These groves are important today as they are potential banks of genetic diversity that must be preserved.[[28]](#footnote-28) These groves also carry everlasting pious status and are a direct way of maintaining the social fabric in the society.[[29]](#footnote-29) These groves have been identified as ‘conspicuous in situ storehouses of flowering, fruit and nut-bearing and medicinal plants otherwise rare or absent in the valley’, ‘symbolic resources’ and ‘religio-cultural reservoirs’ for the people of the Kathmandu valley’.[[30]](#footnote-30) As stated in Gurung & Gurung 1987, cited by Mansberger[[31]](#footnote-31), the span of sacred forests in Nepal is so widespread that it would require a lifetime to document all of them. Yet, these forests have hardly been documented in any literature. While they have been the subject of scientific surveys and studies, there is very little literature available on the documentation or the existence of these forests.

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