

# First Record of an Islamic Sacred Grove From Eastern Maharashtra

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Ethnic communities practice different forms of nature worship around the world. This includes providing protection to small forest patches dedicated to deities and ancestral spirits (Gadgil and Vartak, 1975).

Such forest patches are known as sacred groves. Sacred groves are very ancient and widespread phenomena in the old culture. They are mentioned in Greek and Sanskrit classics and are reported to exist today in number of countries besides India, e.g. Ghana, Nigeria, Syria, Turkey etc. (Gadgil and Vartak, 1975). Indian sacred groves are associated with temples/ monasteries/ shrines with burial grounds – same is the case in Shinto and Ryukyuan religion based sacred groves found in Japan (Soni, 2015). Sacred groves in India exist across diverse topography and climatic conditions from down south to north. As per recent report around 15000 sacred groves have been reported from different parts of India (Chaudhari and Gupta, 2014).

Pioneering work on the sacred groves of Maharashtra was done by Gadgil and Vartak (1980) who reported 233 groves from nine districts of Maharashtra. Later, a survey by the (Deshmukh, 1999) shows existence of 2808 groves from Maharashtra. Work still continues and many more might have been added to the list.

Most of the sacred groves are devoted to some deity. Comparatively very few sacred groves associated with burial grounds exist. These are *masani* sacred groves found among Maler of Bihar (Vidyarthi, 1963), in north Kerala there exist sacred groves where ancestor worship is performed with *theyyam* ritual (Unnikrishnan, 1990), *sasan* sacred groves are burial grounds of tribals of Chhotanagpur (Fernandis, 1993). Such sacred groves are reported from Sangmeshwar tehsil of Ratnagiri district in Maharashtra by Godbole *et al.* (1998).

Islamic sacred groves are under studied because of their rarity. During an opportunistic visit to the Pohra-Malkhed reserve forest, a protected, undisturbed forest patch was found near village Taroda of Chandur-railway tehsil, district Amravati, located along 20°50'51.14 N; 77°57'08.84E. Because of this sacred groves the village is known as 'Pirbabacha Taroda' i.e. Pirbaba's Taroda. The forest surrounding the grove is of dry deciduous type. Some of the indigenous tree species found inside the grove are *Terminalia bellirica* (Gaertn.) Roxb., *Millettia pinnata* (L.) Pierre, *Ziziphus* sp., *Butea monosperma* (Lam.). There is a huge *Ficus benghalensis* L. tree spread over 2.5 acres of land inside the grove due to which, this can also be



Fig 1. A long shot of the Sacred Grove



Fig 2. A view depicting multiple *Ficus benghalensis* aerial roots

considered as a 'sacred tree'. Some of the herbaceous plants and shrubs present in the grove are *Xanthium strumarium* L., *Acalypha indica* L., *Cryptolepis buchananii* Roem. & Schult., *Sida* sp., *Alternanthera* sp., *Blumea* sp., *Hyptis suaveolens* (L.) Poit. *Annona squamosa* L., *Flacourtia indica* (Burm.f.) Merr. There is a religious shrine established in the honour of Pirbaba under this tree. People of all religion and communities come to worship the shrine. There is a small lake and a rivulet also originates from this sacred grove and meets Malkhed lake. Cutting even a single branch of any tree is prohibited. Kerkar (2009) has studied Islamic ecological traditions in the neighboring state of Goa. He notes

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**Fig 3. View of the religious shrine in the grove**

that sufi-traditions have made noteworthy contributions towards bridging the gap between the Hindus and Muslim communities in Goa. Tombstones of some of these pirs are surrounded by native trees; and are never cut. Pirbabacha Taroda is an example of such cultural fusion from Maharashtra. Such groves around tomb of Pir are also reported from West Bengal. *Sannyasi-tala* Sacred Grove at Nabagram village and *Kali-tala* Sacred Grove at Nadra village in Mayureswar-I block, West Bengal, are visited by both Hindu and Muslim devotees (Deb, 2007). In fact most of the sacred groves around a 'Pir-than' (Sufi saint's shrine) are visited by both Hindu and Muslim devotees.

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