

Nature Conservation and Awareness through Pandharpur Waari - A Socio-Cultural Tradition of Maharashtra, India

Research Article

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Abstract

Awareness about nature, its conservation and sustainability have been key factors in socio-cultural traditions and Indian belief systems. The age-old tradition of Pandharpur Waari is such a rich cultural tradition of Maharashtra, where the Saint reformers through their literature have raised many of social, cultural and environmental concerns which has led to awareness and upliftment of the society. Biodiversity is the variety of life on Earth, from genes to ecosystems, and it's essential for health of the planet and all life on it. Understanding about biodiversity begins with the knowledge of Native trees, them being the primary food producers. To spread the knowledge about native trees is thus important. This knowledge will empower individuals, groups and society at a large to implement various mass plantations, forestation drives. Communities if empowered to plan, monitor and implement conservation activities will facilitate public participation and nature conservation. This study examines the awareness and participation of local people through a survey of urban and rural population and assesses their knowledge about native common or rare or wild tree species. Mass plantation if combined with cultural traditions of a place will make nature conservation an embedded practice within the socio-cultural system. Pandharpur Wari is such an example of Cultural Landscape which can be utilized as a stage to understand and spread the awareness among general public.

Keywords: Biodiversity; Native Trees; Mass Plantation; Cultural Traditions; Nature Conservation Etc

Introduction

Nature and ecological conservation is important from the point of view to combat climate change and address environmental sustainability. These are carried out at various levels individually as well as by the group of people, communities etc. These initiatives can become sustainable with the help of community engagement and public participation etc. Afforestation, cleanliness drives, lifestyle changes, species conservation, habitat conservation, ecological restoration measures etc. are some of such examples. Out of these, afforestation, greening initiatives, reforestation seem to be popular and widely adopted method for nature conservation through public participation. The aim of such initiatives seems to be increasing the green cover, enhancing the ecosystem services etc. But do these

initiatives adopt an ecological approach for implementation is the important question. "Nevertheless, nativeness remains central to debates around ecological integrity and ecosystem functioning in urban green spaces" [1]. "Although it does not always hold up to scrutiny, nativeness is often used as a proxy for environmental compatibility when selecting species for urban landscapes" [2]. While the public participation in such nature conservation initiatives is gaining traction over a period of time, it is important to understand the individual level of association of people among the society with plant species and mass plantation drives. To assess this awareness various parameters need to be assessed. Existing awareness about the native tree species, consideration of biodiversity sensitive plantation is another area to be focused. Public participation in mass plantation and awareness about ecological plantation are aspects which need

to be studied. "Counseling is an influential factor in increasing community participation"[3]. Thus it is important to conduct knowledge sharing sessions along with the hands on participation of stakeholders in mass plantation drives.

Many socio-cultural traditions around the world seem to be aimed considering nature conservation at its primary focus. One of the examples of Socio-cultural association with nature conservation is observed during Pandharpur Waari. The Pandharpur Wari is an annual pilgrimage of 21 days to the Vithoba temple in Pandharpur, Maharashtra, India, dedicated to Lord Vithoba, a form of Lord Krishna. Pilgrims, known as "Warkaris," undertake this journey, often covering long distances on foot, singing devotional songs. It is socio-cultural tradition of Maharashtra where lakhs of devotees participate. In this spiritual, devotional journey, many promotional activities, awareness campaigns about nature, technology etc. are carried out at various spots on the Wari route. These initiatives help create awareness among the society at large. To name a few, Nature conservation drives like the plantation drives, distribution of native plant seeds to the participants, sessions about sustainable agricultural practices and products are some of the initiatives. "It is important to incorporate the social and cultural dimensions of 'nativeness' of public trees to reflect the values and preferences of urban publics." [1]. To understand these socio-cultural dimensions and assess the awareness about nature conservation among "Warkari" sect is the prime focus of this research paper.

Research Methodology

The methodology adopted for this study is to find out the level of awareness about native plant species and mass plantation drives through survey of the Waarkaris. This strategy was adopted based on the public participation measures to be considered while implementing mass plantation drives during socio-cultural traditions. "By including the residents in the conversation of which trees to plant, we could understand their attitudes about urban trees and built democratic solutions in light of local problems and needs." [4]. Survey questionnaire was drafted based upon the awareness about native species, rare, endangered species and mass plantation participation. The survey was conducted at Waari Halt at Yavat Village in Maharashtra by students of S.K.N.C.O.A. under the faculty guidance. The outcome of survey was analyzed. Level of awareness was assessed based on the primary data. Ideal methods are discussed as guidelines to follow while implementing such plantation drives.

Discussion

The survey was conducted for 84 Pandharpur Wari participants out of which 56 were male participants and 28 were female participants. Age of the participants varied from 15 years to 82 years. Occupation of the Warkaris was majorly farming, followed by laborers, business etc. Survey participants were residents from various parts of Maharashtra. Association of participants with Pandharpur Wari was found to be extensive, varied across different age groups from 02 years to 32 years. The involvement of Warkaris in this spiritual and cultural journey reflects the impact Wari has on various age groups of Warkari sect. During the survey about awareness of native plant species and mass plantation, varied responses were received. Analysis of these is stated below.

Pandharpur Wari Participants

84 responses

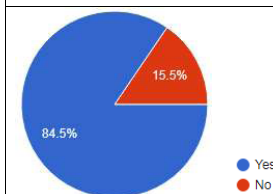


Table 1: Question 1. Have you (Survey participant) participated in Mass plantation?

Pandharpur Wari Participants

84 responses

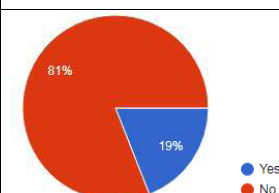


Table 2: Question 2. Have you ever participated in mass plantation during Wari enroute to Pandharpur?

Pandharpur Wari Participants

84 responses

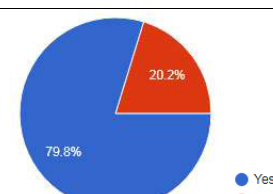


Table 3: Question 3. Do you find it necessary to plant the trees on the Waari route which may help the spiritual journey and convenient for the Pilgrims

Pandharpur Wari Participants

84 responses

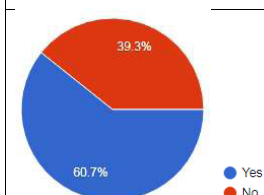
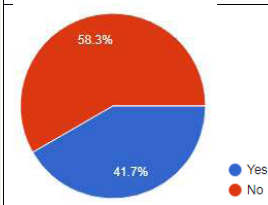


Table 4: Question 4. Are you aware about the difference between native and non-native tree species?

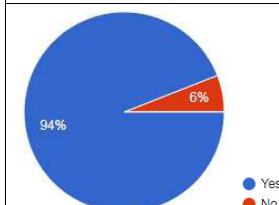
Pandharpur Wari Participants

84 responses

**Table 5:** Question 5. Do you know about some of the less known tree species like Aain, Putranjeeva, Arjun, Chandava, Maharukh etc.

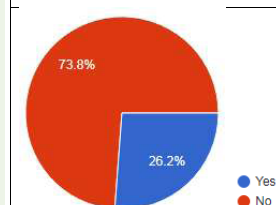
Pandharpur Wari Participants

84 responses

**Table 9:** Question 9. If mass plantation drive is adopted along the Wari route do you think it will be beneficial for Waarkaris?

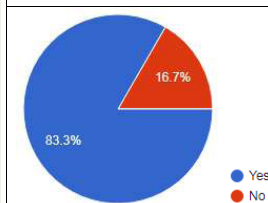
Pandharpur Wari Participants

84 responses

**Table 6:** Question 6. Have you ever seen or observed any of the above trees?

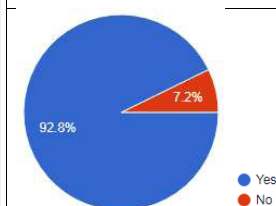
Pandharpur Wari Participants

84 responses

**Table 7:** Question 7. Have you observed the raptor bird species like eagle, hawk, owl, kite etc. in your town, village or city?

Pandharpur Wari Participants

84 responses

**Table 8:** Question 8. Will you be interested to participate in mass plantation drives or initiatives along Wari Route?

From the above data, a large number 84.5% Waarkaris stated they have participated in Mass Plantation at some point of time, out of which 19 % have participated in mass plantation on route to Pandharpur Wari. Majority of people stated it would be convenient for the spiritual journey Waarkaris if the trees are planted on Pandharpur Waari route. 93.8% of participants displayed interest in participation in mass plantation during Pandharpur Waari, while 94% thought mass plantation on the wari route will be beneficial for the waarkaris. When asked about the awareness of native and exotic plant species only 60.7% of the participants were found to be aware. Approximately 1/3rd of the participants lacked to know this difference. Familiar tree species of the participants included Mango, Banyan, Peepal, Tamrind, fruit bearing trees like jamun, custard apple, chikoo etc. Another category of plant species included cultivated crops like sugarcane, corn, jowar, lemon etc. Knowledge about less known tree species like Aain, Arjun, Putranjiva, Maharukh, chandava was also found to be limited. Only 41.7% of participants had heard about these species, a staggering 58.3% reported to have unheard of such species. Out of these above 41.7% only half about 26.2% participants have seen or observed such species at some point of time. 83.3% participants reported to have observed avi-faunal raptor species like eagle, hawk, owl, kite etc. in the vicinity of their village, town or city.

The above data shows a tremendous knowledge gap among the Warkari sect with respect to awareness about plant species. Their knowledge about plant palette seems to be limited to productive and cultivated plant species with few exceptions.

Conclusion

Socio – cultural traditions have the potential to create a positive impact on community as well as society at large. Through above research it has been observed that productive plant species have always been a popular choice among the people when compared with the ecological perspective. In the purview of climate change though, we need to adopt a broader ecological perspective. Hence the awareness about tree species, their ecosystem functions can play a vital role in nature conservation and combating climate change. Apart from this when community engagement is the method adopted for mass tree plantation, knowledge sharing sessions and informative

lectures related to the aim of the initiative, techniques, ideal methods of tree plantation, information about the tree species need to be conducted for the involved stakeholders. Without this the holistic results cannot be achieved since most of these initiatives involve only hands on involvement of the participants. Awareness drives, demonstrative landscapes like arboretum, botanical gardens, biodiversity parks, mass plantation through public participation can be some of the projects and initiatives which can be adopted to upgrade the level of awareness and association of people with less known tree species. Socio-cultural traditions are one of the best platforms where a wide section of participants from various backgrounds, classes and groups are involved at a given location to implement such initiatives. Various ecological, functional and social objectives can be achieved on a single platform which will help elevate the society at a higher level of consciousness. Thus looking at socio-cultural traditions from a perspective of public awareness and sensitization of mass community can be beneficial to address climate based issues and create ecological and sustainable landscapes.

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