Biodiversity conservation

Abstract

India’s biodiversity encompasses a wide spectrum of habitats that include tropical rainforests, alpine vegetation, temperate forests, and coastal wetlands. Traditional societies have paid a great deal of attention to the study of nature conservation. Although Himalaya accounts for 18% of the total area in India, it covers more than 31. 05% of India’s forest cover and 40% of the species endemic to the Indian Sub-continent. Many mountain societies hence maintained a holistic view of the socio-ecological system. An expression of this relationship is represented in the form of sacred landscape which is a concept identified by many traditional societies and often protected by cultural and religious values. Many protected areas contain sites of importance to one or more faiths. These are of both sacred natural sites and built monuments (such as monasteries, temples, shrines, and pilgrimage trails). Enforcement in these protected areas has created a lot of conflicts between the local people and protected area managers, due to the restrictions enforced by these managers against the traditional usufruct rights of the local people. These conflicts tend to act as major hurdles to achieving biodiversity conservation. Conservation of biological resources through religion and belief has a long history in Garhwal Himalaya. This article aims to document the different ethics enshrined within the Hindu community that have an inherent role in the conservation of biodiversity in Uttarakhand Himalaya.

Keywords: religion; belief; forests, sacred groves; biodiversity conservation; Garhwal Himalaya

Introduction

India has a long tradition of wise conservation strategies that are useful to people and society. Biodiversity is the most valuable but least appreciated resource, and it can be a key to the maintenance of the world (Wilson, 1992). In India, biodiversity outside protected areas is rich because of close relationships between religious, socio-cultural beliefs and conservation. Rapid decline in biological diversity- species, ecosystems, and genetic diversity – is one of the critical challenges of the 21st century. There are many practical reasons for conserving biodiversity, not to mention benefits related to food, medicine, and other materials as well as the environmental services supplied by natural ecosystems. However, the driving force behind biodiversity conservation remains and will primarily remain ethical. According to surveys, most people believe that we have an obligation to avoid the extinction of species and races and the destruction of ecosystems caused by our own actions (WWF, 2005).

A symbiotic relationship exists between biological and cultural diversity. This relationship is an important factor for ensuring sustainable human development. Nature provides light, air, food, and water through living process of creative renewal. This awareness of life in nature as a precondition for human survival led to the worship of light, air, food, and water. Indian culture evolved in the forest, first during the Vedic period and later during the times of Buddha and Mahavir. Religious beliefs and rituals (invariable parts of the cultural milieu) are very much inter-linked and intimately related to the management of ecosystems. Religion aids the conservation of natural biodiversity in several different ways. The first is by

providing ethical and social models for living respectfully with nature. For most cultures, religion is a primary means of judging right and wrong. Despite certain differences, nature is included in the religious code of morality and etiquette in all religions. These ethical beliefs and religious values influence our behaviour toward others, including our relationship with all creatures and plant life. Such beliefs and customs are defined as superstition. Due to these superstitious circumstances, religious values that acted as sanctions against environmental destruction do not retain a high priority and become displaced by economic factors.

Forests in India remain central to its civilisational evolution. In India, ‘ Aranya Sanskriti’ or a forest culture evolved during the ancient times as education was primarily given in the forest called “ ashramas”. These were the places where most of the scientific research and cultural writings were done. In the Rig Veda, forests are described as Aranyani or mother goddess, who ensures the availability of food to humankind and takes care of wildlife. Sacred sites are probably the oldest method of habitat protection on the planet and still form a large and mainly unrecognized network of sanctuaries around the world. Some researchers believe that there may be as many sacred sites as protected areas (WWF, 2005). However, many of them are threatened due to fragmentation, habitat degradation, infrastructure development, disputes over land, and a general lack of respect for their intangible value (Khumbongmayum et al., 2004). The combined effects of such activities have led to the degradation of areas that have been held sacred by particular cultures for hundreds or even thousands of years. Links between sacred land (and water) and conservation are not confined to minority faiths,

as they exist virtually in all faiths around the world. The mainstream faiths, with many millions of followers, have a huge influence on the way in which we view and interact with the natural world. This influence is reflected in large part by shaping people's philosophy and ethics. However, this is linked to the ownership of land, investment, and political and social factor. The practice of biodiversity conservation is deeply rooted in science along with the associated secular and materialistic world-view. This can pose a threat to sacred spaces, if spiritual, cultural, and religious values are not included in the planning stage of conservation management. Although protecting a sacred site officially or through legislation prevents its traditional use, it is likely to cause a cultural split and indignation by degrading the well preserved sacred nature (WWF, 2005).

Background of the area

Uttarakhand is divided into two administrative divisions, Garhwal and Kumaon. The Garhwal region extends from 29°26′ to 30° 28′ North latitude and 77°49′ 80°06′ East longitude. It is situated between the tributaries of Ganges- Alaknanda and Mandakini and was designated by Aryans as the celestial land or " Dev Bhoomi". In fact, heaven (Swarg) in those days was sought to be identified with the region of Garhwal Himalaya, where the mountains (like ' Meru', ' Kailash', ' Gandhmadan') and blessed habitat (like ' Kuvela', ' Shiva', and ' Vishnu' (Mahabharata)) were found. After the ' Vedic Age', this tract had been known as ' Brahmarishi Deha' (Manu: 11. 1919), while during the epic period it was known as ' Panchala Desha'. Afterward, the region was known as Garhwal which stemmed from two words Garh (territory) and wal (the name of the king in that period).

The Kumaon region extends from 28° 44′ and 30° 49′ N (latitude) and 78° 45′ and 81° 1′ E (longitude). The word Kumaon can be traced back to the 5th century BC. The Kassite Assyrians left their homeland ‘ Kummah’, on the banks of river Euphrates and settled in the northern part of India. These inhabitants formed Koliyan tribes, as they settled newly in ‘ Kumaon’. Lord Buddha’s mother, Mayabati belonged to this clan. As another version of the origin, the word Kumaon has been believed to derive from “ Kurmanchal” a hill near Champawat which was the old capital of the Chand kings. Kurmanchal was the land of the Kurmavatar (the tortoise incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the preserver according to Hindu mythology) (Gajrani, 2004).

The earliest historical references to the region are found in the Vedas. The existence of the mountains was specifically addressed in the Mahabharata, dated back to about 1000 BC, when the protagonists of the epic, the Pandavas, are said to have ended their life on earth by ascending the slopes of a peak in Western Garhwal called Swargarohini – literally, the ‘ Ascent to Heaven’.

Physiography of Uttarakhand

Uttarakhand is the youngest mountain state of the Republic of India and was carved out of Uttar Pradesh on the 9th of November 2000. It consists of two words “ uttar” meaning north and “ khand” meaning “ part”. It occupies 17. 3% of India’s total land area with 53, 566 sq. km of which 92. 57 % is under hills and 7. 43% under plains. Uttarakhand is located between 770 34′ 27″ to 810 02′ 22″ E longitude and 280 53′ 24″ to 310 27′ 50″ N latitude (Figure 1). The state has diverse habitats ranging from the snow bound peaks of the Himalayas with the highest Nanda Devi (7, 817 m) to the sub-tropical Terai

region. It has a population of about 8. 48 million at 158. 3 persons per sq. km (FSI, 2005). The border of Uttarakhand touches with Nepal in the East and China in the North.

Traditional knowledge and Environmental conservation

Traditional societies are characterized by their close interconnection with nature and its resources. They depend upon natural resources and biodiversity for their livelihood (Ramakrishnan, 1996). This bond with nature and natural resources extends beyond the economic realm, as social, cultural and spiritual dimensions also play a significant role (Ramakrishnan et al. 1998). Ecosystems sustain themselves in a dynamic balance based on cycles and fluctuations, which are nonlinear processes. The theme of traditional ecological knowledge is important in the consideration of a broad range of questions related to nature-human relationships. Different groups of people in various parts of the world perceive and interact with nature differently by sharing different traditions of environmental knowledge. Their perceptions and knowledge are in part shaped by their values, worldviews, environmental ethics, and religion. In the exploration of environmental ethics and religion to an ecologically sustainable society, indigenous peoples and traditional ecological knowledge have attracted considerable attention from both scholars and popular movements. As a knowledge and practice belief, traditional ecological knowledge includes worldview and religious traditions of a society. Every cultural group shares a range of environmental values and ethics along with their practices. Environmental relations of a group are not uniform but they are shaped by the day-to-day interactions as well as their worldview and ethics.

The Hindus in India accept nature as divinity, manifestation of God; as such, natural elements like plants, animals, water, earth and fire all become part of ceremonies and worship. Traditional knowledge can range from what are called “ old wives’ tales” to extremely complex, formal and codified systems, e. g., the Indian medical knowledge system of Ayurveda (Nadkarni and Chauhan, 2004). Plant conservation is often presented based on scientific contexts of reality and truth as well as related themes of individual to ecological renewal. For many visitors, their fundamental spiritual or religious perspectives frame their beliefs, values, and actions, including all aspects of plant conservation, education, and renewal. In Garhwal Himalaya, there are communities that are the repositories of vast accumulations of traditional knowledge and experiences that link humanity with its ancient origins. The local communities and their wealth of local knowledge are seen as “ the heroes of resource conservation, rather than villains of resource depletion as known earlier.” (page 9, Agarwal, 1997). Traditional knowledge of water management in Uttarakhand was reported by a few authors (Rawat and Sah, 2009; Sharma, 2008) The disappearance of these communities is a loss for the society, which otherwise could have informed us a great deal of their traditional skills (WCED, 1987).

Traditional knowledge and water management

Water is a precious gift of nature and indispensable for the survival of all forms of life. The use of water has been an integral part of human life, as old as civilization itself. The great Harappan civilization developed in this continent during 2500-1500 BC mainly because of water. Vedic literature (800-600 BC), especially *Rig-Veda* is replete with hymns about irrigated land,

flowing rivers, ponds, and wells (Agarwal and Narayan, 1997). As an integral part of the Indian heritage, the Himalayas of which forests provide vegetative cover for the major river systems in India serve as water reservoir and a warehouse of biodiversity (Rawat, 2000). Uttarakhand is the catchment area of the Indo-Gangetic plain and the cradle of the Indo-Gangetic civilization. Water is revered and regarded as sacred from time immemorial.

In Garhwal and Kumaon region, villages have a set of cultivated land, human settlement, and forest area; in the upper catchment of the villages, they used to have smaller or bigger water pounding structures such as Tals, Khals, Chals and Rou. Almost 95% of the villages in Uttarakhand have such types of structure in its territory or catchment. Their recognition of water retaining structures and water pounding structures has been built through their tradition. In scientific perspective, their knowledge of smaller water recharge structures (khals) or bigger water bodies (tals) in higher reaches of the habitation or agricultural land played an important role in the recharge of springs, rivulets, and gadheras.

Traditional medical system

The traditional medical systems of northern India (such as Ayurveda and Tibetan) are a part of time tested culture (Kala et al. 2006). Medicinal plants have strong acceptance in religious activities of north Indian native communities, who worshiped the plants in the form of god, goddesses, and minor deities (Silori and Badola, 2000; Dhyani, 2000). To name some of them, Origanum vulgare, Saussurea obvallata, Ocimum sanctum, Cedrus deodara, Cynodon dactylon, Aegle marmelos, Juniperus communis, Musa

paradissica, Nardostachys grandiflora, Zanthoxylum armatum, Ficus benghalensis, and Ficus religiosa are examples of the medicinal plants used commonly for medicinal as well as a religious purposes by the Hindus in northern India (Kala et al., 2006). Apart from human use, many plant species were also used in animal husbandary as the primary source of healthcare (Samal et al. 2004, Kala et al. 2004).

Bhotiyas are an ethnic community of Mongoloid origin. They were traditional trans-border traders who traded between India and erstwhile Tibet (now China) and Nepal until trans-bordering was terminated in 1962 due to Sino-Indian conflict (Farooquee et al. 2004). Until the 1960s, people residing in the remote and inaccessible high altitudes of Himalaya were not exposed to any forms of medical treatment. Hence, they were totally dependent on the Bhotiya system of traditional treatment. The indigenous Bhotiya treatment mainly focused on ailments like gastric problems, digestive system, dysentery and diarrhoea, liver malfunctioning, kidney stone, fever, blood purifier, common cold and cough, skin diseases, and vigour and vitality of the body.

Taboos as a means of plant and animal conservation

Taboos are the unwritten, orally transmitted traditional and social rules that regulate human behavior (Colding and Folke, 1997; Banjo et al. 2006). In Uttarakhand, there are a number of plants, animals, and lakes that are regarded as sacred in the sense that no felling or exploitation was carried out. As a result, it means that different species of trees and animals which are economically important are preserved in such a way that they will form a good genetic reservoir and serve as a guide against extinction of these

species. It will be worthwhile to examine the cognitive foundations of the indigenous knowledge, ethnoecology, and ethnoforestry. Ethno-forestry is the study of continued practice of creation, conservation, management, and use of forest resources, through customary ways in local communities (Pandey, 1996, 2003). Religious beliefs, tradition, and culture are the products of logical internalization of human experience and learning. Historically, several religions have explicitly or implicitly prescribed teaching related to duty of its followers toward the environment (Banjo et al., 2006). This view was substantiated by Anderson as cited by Pandey (2003), when he stated that ecological wisdom in taboos, symbols, and cosmologies of traditional societies transmit the knowledge of conservation to the younger generation. It helped them manage resources well through religious or ritual representation. Trees have a very special role in the ethos of the people in Uttarakhand. Chandrakanth and Romm (1991) stated that sacred trees symbolize specific arrays of human conditions, possibilities, and anticipation. Species of trees are worshipped as (1) manifestation of gods, (2) representatives of particular stars and planets, and (3) symbols of the natural elements (energy, water, land, and air) each of which has its own independent and rational meanings. There are examples where communities regulate the use of resource by restricting the access to resources and enforcing compliance through religious belief, ritual, and social convention which in fact help biodiversity conservation in such community. Trees have long been protected or conserved through religious taboo, values, and practices (Pandey, 2003). The roles of religious and cultural beliefs in protecting trees have been observed by other researchers (Pandey, 2003). The dependence of rural people on the forest and their interests in its

preservation have been institutionalized through various social and cultural mechanism (such as taboos). Despite their apparent irrationality, religious restriction such as taboos may thus be highly rational ways of conserving resources: Pandey (2003) described social restraints such as taboos which led to indigenous biological conservation like providing total protection to some biological communities, habitat patches, and certain selected species.

The flower of Brahmkamal (*Saussurea obvallata*), an alpine species is the most valued as the offerings to Lord Shiva (*Shri Kedarnath*) and Lord Vishnu (*Shri Badrinath*) in Garhwal Himalaya. These flowers are not plucked before Nanda Astami (falls in the last week of August or the first week of September) as the seeds mature at this time. These people have a notion that if the flowers of *Brahmkamal* are plucked before this date, there will be a natural calamity. In Indonesia, as in Garhwal Himalaya, *Ficus bengalensis* is considered to be sacred. Springs are often found under banyan trees in Indonesia, as they have a belief that holy spirits reside in the trees and ensure the availability of clean water. Dodital and Devariyatal a two lakes in Uttarkashi and Rudraprayag district of Uttarakhand – are considered sacred so that fishing is completely restricted. There is a taboo that if fishing is done in that lake, fisherman will suffer from leprosy. Species such as sacred fig (*Ficus religiosa),* mountain lion (*Felis concolor*), and southern pocket gopher (*Thomomys umbrinus emotus*) are protected by Hindus' taboo for specific species all across the Indian subcontinent (Colding and Folke, 2000).

Sacred Groves and Biodiversity Conservation

There has been a close linkage between human beings and nature conservation since the beginning of hunting and gathering societies. The

relationship between humankind and Earth is based on a belief that the planet’s biospheric life support system is sacred (Cairns, 2002). In India, as elsewhere in many parts of the world, a number of communities practice different forms of nature worship. Early humans worshipped nature with reverence and exploited its resources sustainably to meet their minimum needs only. Every culture has beliefs which answer in different ways the fundamental question about how and where people originated, and how they should behave with their environment (Elder and Wong, 1994). Forests are the subject of a great deal of myth, legend, and lore. Societies most closely entwined with forests tend to regard them in a healthy respect, awe at their splendour and majesty, and sometimes feel dread and fear of the powerful spirits that lurk within them. They have been the lifeline for tribal and other forest-dwelling communities.

For conservation of this vital resource, people began to use the concept of sacred groves. The historical links of scared groves have been traced back to the pre-agricultural, hunting and gathering stage of societies, when human society was in a primitive state (Gadgil and Vartak, 1975; Khumbongmayum et al. 2004). The most ancient *vedic* scriptures demonstrate an ecological awareness and great respect for the natural world through the praise of deities. There are many specific teachings on environmental matters throughout the texts, and ecological activitists have drawn much inspiration from those (Vanucci, 1999). Such concepts have been a part of rich tradition and diverse culture in Indian societies through many generations. Sacred Groves (SGs) and temple forests are one of the oldest forms of conservation. These small forest patches with tall trees, lianas, and shrubs representing

the storied structure of well maintained forests are scattered amidst the degraded landscapes all over the country. These forests, although small and scattered, share two common features, *i. e.* , sacredness and faith in a deity. A sacred forest can therefore be described as any forest or vegetation strand that is considered valuable by local communities and protected by the community for religious and spiritual reasons (Spencer, 1998). One of such significant traditions is the protection of patches of forests dedicated to deities and/or ancestral spirits. A few examples described by Vanucci (1999) (as in Ramasubramanian, 2008, Page 5) are:

1. “ Do not cut trees, because they remove pollution” (Rig veda, 6: 48: 17).
2. “ Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere” (Yajur veda, 5: 43).
3. Destruction of forests is taken as destruction of the state, and reforestation an act of rebuilding the state and advancing its welfare. Protection of animals is considered a sacred duty (Charak sanhita).
4. No creature is superior to any other. Human beings should not be above nature. Let no one species encroach over the rights and privileges of other species (Isha-Upanishads)

Plants (Oshadhis) and trees (Vanaspatis) are embodied as goddesses and deities and collectively aroused as jungle goddess or ‘ Aranyani’ in the Vedas. All religions and cultures of the South Asian region are ingrained in forests, not out of fear and ignorance but due to the ecological perception that SGs are the segments of landscape containing vegetation and other forms of life and geographical features. These SGs are delimited and

protected by human societies under the belief that keeping them in a relatively undisturbed state is important to humans. A number of human societies in Asia, Africa, Europe, America, and Australia had long been preserving certain sections of their natural environment as sacred groves (Hughes and Chandran, 1998). The groves have evolved under different socio-ecological and cultural situations to offer many ecological, environmental, and socio-cultural functions to the society. During the ancient times, indigenous people depended on forests and rivers for their daily subsistence and regarded a variety of natural objects as sacred. The hoarding and greedy tendency for over exploitation of the resources never existed in the early man’s thought.

Mostly all the religious shrines in Garhwal Himalaya are located beside the confluence of five tributaries in the sacred river Ganges. Although biological diversity of Himalaya is very rich, relatively little is known about the sacred groves of this region. A variety of natural objects are regarded as sacred by the Hindu community, which include the river Ganges, its tributaries and their confluence along with the religious shrines (Badrinath, Kedarnath, Yamunotri and Gangotri) and sacred mountain peaks (Nanda Devi, Trishul, Chaukhamba, Kailash, Binsar and Shivling). Trees are an indispensable part of life, and their importance described in the epics “ Ramayana” has left a great impact on mankind which maintained equilibrium for the subsistence of life until the last century (i. e., 20th century). However, increasing population and tendency toward industrialization brought an imbalance to this natural equilibrium. The basic elements of nature *Prithvi* (Earth), *Agni* (Fire), *Jal* (Water), *Vayu* (Air), and *Akash* (Space) were worshipped in one

form or another since ancient times in the Hindu mythology which as a result acquired the protection for spiritual and religious reasons. It was through the worship of trees that human beings attempted to approach God (Sinha, 1979).

Many plant species are considered to be sacred in the Himalaya and are used in rituals (Table 1) and offerings to gods such as Ficus *benghalensis* , *Ficus religiosa, Ocimum sanctum* , *Cynodon dactylon* , *Mangifera indica* , *Astromonium* spp, *Azadirachta indica* , *Sassurea obvallata* (Anthwal et al. 2006). Because many plant species (Table 2) have medicinal value, they are used in ayurvedic medicines to cure ailments (Anthwal et al. 2006). The sacred animals include: tiger, cow, elephant, peacock, bullock, cobra, rat, cat, and birds (like neelkanth, hilas, ababil, and vulture). In India, especially the people residing in hills have a rich tradition of environmental conservation through their socio-cultural and religious interactions. Sacred groves in the hills of Garhwal are mentioned in old Hindu scriptures like the Puranas. Malhotra (1998) in his partial enumeration of groves in India reported 5, 691 sacred groves. Around 14, 000 sacred groves have been reported from all over India, which act as reservoirs of rare fauna and flora. Some experts believe that the total number of sacred groves could be as high as 100, 000 (Malhotra et al. 2001; Guha, 2000).

The rejection and replacement of those traditional practices with the advent of modern industrial society changed doubtlessly the ethos from an orientation toward conservation to exploitation of nature. Nevertheless, certain religious taboos and social practices are still observed among the hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, and even some sections of modern society,

which help in conservation. Sacred groves are ecologically and genetically important. They are the abodes of rare, endemic, and endangered species of flora and fauna. Besides, they serve the function of preserving genetic diversity of common tree species. The hill community of Garhwal Himalaya regards a variety of natural objects, i. e., rivers, lakes, rivulets, springs, confluences, mountain peaks, plants, animals, flowers, and even the entire Himalayas as sacred. The Himalayas have been considered the home of Lord *Shiva* and *Vishnu* . The distinctive local belief systems were woven together into a composite fabric by identifying many of the spirits with a few key gods in the Hindu pantheon. Predominant among these were *Shiva* or *Ishwara* (male phallic worship) and the mother goddess (female fertility worship). A good proportion of local spirits were identified with these two, while others were associated with them. Thus, elephant worship became the worship of *Ganesha* , one of the sons of *Shiva* and *Parvati* . *Shiva* is also called *Pasupati* – Lord of beasts. He rides a male bull, *Nandi* and around his neck is an intertwined cobra. The Deodar (*Cedrus deodara*) has been considered the tree of God and is planted around temples in Garhwal Himalaya.

Many landscapes (Chiplakedar, Tarkeshwar, Haryali, Binsar, Kuinkaleshwar, Tapovan, Thal ke Dhar, Nagdev, Kalimath, Goldev, Maywati, Kot, Syahi devi, Chandrabadni, Paabo, Dewal and Chapdon) represent rich biological diversity and complex ecosystems in Garhwal Himalaya. These landscapes have been considered sacred due to association with a deity and are conserved in pristine condition by forbidding the exploitation of any resource from these landscapes (Table 3). This strategy is analogous to the present day’s concept of biodiversity conservation through protection of sanctuaries, national

parks, and biosphere reserves. A brief description of some of the sacred groves located in the Garhwal Himalaya are listed below:

1. The Haryali sacred grove is located at an altitude of 2, 850 m above mean sea level in the Rudraprayag district of Garhwal Himalaya. Fetching of fodder and fuelwood and the movement of women and *Shudras* (scheduled castes) have been strictly prohibited in this grove since the Epic period (Mahabharata period). A temple of Goddess Hariyali Devi is located in this forest patch.

2. Devban sacred grove is located 16 kms away from Chakrata at an altitude of 2896 m above mean sea level in the Dehradun district of Garhwal Himalaya. It is surrounded by dense forests.

3. The Binsar sacred grove is located at a distance of 20 km north of Thalisain (Pauri Garhwal) at an altitude of 2, 567 m above mean sea level. A close linkage between cultural attributes and forest conservation has been clearly visible here since the post Vedic period.

4. Surkanda devi sacred grove is situated at an elevation of 3030 m above mean sea level. The temple is situated on the top of a mountain and is of great religious significance. A fair is held every year on Ganga Dussehra during May-June.

5. Tapkeshwar sacred grove is situated on the bank of a rivulet in the Dehradun district and is an ancient place of worship. It is named Tapkeshwar as water droplets, originating from a rock, fall on the shivling placed in the shrine. It is devoted to Lord Shiva.

6. Sahastradhara literally meaning “ the thousand fold spring” is situated at a distance of 11 kms from Dehradun. The Baldi River and caves provide a breathtaking view. There is a sulphur spring in which people bathe in the belief that bathing in the spring cures skin infections.

7. Chandrabani sacred grove (also known as Gautam Kund) is situated 7 kms away from Dehradun. According to mythological beliefs, this spot was inhabited by Maharishi Gautam, his wife, and daughter Anjani who are widely worshipped by the people. It is believed that Ganga had manifested herself on the spot that is popularly known as Gautam Kund.

8. Kedarnath is considered the holiest of Shiva’s shrines in the Himalayas. It is likened in the Skanda Purana to Jahnavi (Ganga) amongst rivers, the Brahmin amongst men, and gold amongst metals. Hindus believe that whoever dies here becomes one with Shiva and that the properties of the sacred land are believed to cleanse the most hardened sinner. The temple stands at the head of the Mandakini river in the shadow of the Kedarnath peak. It is dedicated to the worship of Sadasiva, the invisible form of Shiva. The symbolic phallus, the Jyotirlinga or resplendent lingam, one of the twelve scattered over India, is in the form of a natural rock; it is also called the Shankaracharyashiva. Beyond the temple stretches, the snowy expanse is known as the mahapanth, the highway of heaven. A short distance away is a precipice known as *Bhairav-jhanp* -Shiva’s leap. Until the first quarter of the last century, certain devotees would commit ritual suicide by throwing themselves off the edge in the belief that Shiva would thereby grant them instant salvation. Not very far away is the Chorabari Tal, now renamed the Gandhi Sarovar, where the river Mandakini originates.

9. Dhwaj sacred grove is 15 kms fro