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Protecting groves is more vital than farm loan waiver'

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Sacred groves are communally protected forest fragments with significant religious connotations. Over the past few decades, IISc professor TV Ramachandra and his team have done extensive work on the status of the groves and suggested measures to protect them.

In an interview, Ramachandra says kans are being steadily encroached and points to the negligence of decision makers for the damage. Excerpts:

What is your take on the status of kans in Karnataka?

In the past, the groves were larger, each extending from a few acres to several hundred acres. For example, in Sorab taluk in Shivamogga, there were about 171 kans spread over 32,000 acres. Halesorabkan, one of the largest, had an area of close to 1,000 acres. Today, many groves have been encroached, fragmented or are neglected.

What's the reason for their decline?

Decision makers have not understood the fact that protection of sacred groves is linked to hydrology and food security. It is this that is leading to their decline. These community lands, which are a repository of native flora and undisturbed fauna, need attention from the biodiversity angle as well. Sadly, haphazard land use changes, rampant encroachment and lack of protection have damaged groves.

How can this be reversed?

There are simple protection measures that can be taken. When the Western Ghats Task Force was active, we had marked a boundary and dug a trench around a kan in Shivamogga to protect it. Within a few years, the number of trees in the kan went up from 52 to 130. We need to revive such umbrella bodies. Today, many groves are under the administration of the revenue department and we have found that many deputy commissioners don't understand the importance of these groves. They do not conduct inspections and have very little data on the groves. It is time the forest department took over and managed groves.

What should the government do to protect sacred groves?

Kans play a crucial role in ensuring food and water security for our future generation. If the present government really wants to save farmers from suicide, it should first protect sacred groves. This is more important than the farm loan waiver. We should protect groves to secure the future of our children.

Many tribal communities played a key role in protecting groves. How important is community connect?

Wherever sacred groves have survived in Karnataka — or elsewhere for that matter — it is largely due to active participation of local communities. Active village forest committees (VFCs) have conserved groves and in areas where tribal communities live, the groves are rich. Tribal and ancient communities do not hunt or remove a tree from the grove as they feel it is sacred to the community. Sadly, these communities are being pushed out of the forest. Also, modern-day politicians are breaking the bond between community and groves for personal gain. Forest protection committees at gram panchayat level have to be strengthened.