

## **The Role of Sarna in Forest Conservation and Wildfire Prevention: An Indigenous Tribal Religion of India**

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### **Abstract**

Through this article I want to focus on the role of Sarna people, an indigenous tribal religion of India in forest conservation and wildlife prevention. They mainly worship the nature gods such as mountains, forests, cattle, flora and fauna among others. They have their own calendar of festivals, which does not match with those of other faiths. They are also not idol worshippers like Hindus. The tribals refused to follow any other religious faith such as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. They stick to their own customs and traditions, despite the insurgence of Christian missionaries and proponents of different other faiths. It is true that nature is worshipped in almost every religion. One of the oldest Hindu spiritual texts, Rigveda, too is a compilation of hymns dedicated to Nature God – earth, moon, sun, space, rivers, mountains, oceans, rain, fire and herbs. These indigenous people always helped the seers and saints perform their spiritual exercises atop mountains, dense forests and such other secluded places, but rarely adopted their religious faiths. Adivasis didn't fit into Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra categories – specified by Hindu law-giver Manu. Through this article my exploration would be on how religious belief of Sarna followers is an ecological expression of their existence that maintains an intimate relationship with nature.

**Keywords:** Sarna, Indigenous, Forest, Conservation, Ecological , Wildfire

### **Introduction:**

India is a diverse country and it is home to approximately 1.5 billion people. India is also a vast country in terms of geography, ethnicity and cultural diversity. Around 104 million indigenous tribal people lived in India. These tribal people follow their own rituals, religious and cultural customs and beliefs. Many among them have converted into the major religions of India such as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. But a significant number of these people still follow their own religious and cultural tradition. There are many religions among the tribal people but Sarna stands out one of the major indigenous religions. According to the 2011 census the followers of Sarna religion in India are around 5 million primarily in the eastern states of Jharkhand (83.33%), Odisha (8.14%), West Bengal (8.13%), Bihar (0.21%), and Chhattisgarh (0.16%), with smaller

numbers of followers in Assam (301), Punjab (190), and Madhya Pradesh (133). Scheduled Tribes comprise the majority of believers at 92.60%, while Other Backward Classes and Non-Scheduled Communities accounted for 7.39%. Among the prominent tribes practicing Sarna are Santal (30.48%), Oraon (21.35%), Ho (17.87%), Munda (12.48%), Bhumij (1.72%), Lohra (1.70%), Mahali (1.07%), Kharia (0.87%), and Bedia (0.64%). The majority of Sarna believers dwelt in the forests and hilly regions of central and eastern India.

The term 'Sarna' is derived from the Mundari language, specifically the word 'Sar' which means a grove of Sal trees. The Sarna religion is deeply engrained in the worship of nature. The adherents of this religion maintain a strong bondage with natural elements, such as, Jal (water), Jungle (forest), Zameen (land), and hills. They worship these natural elements as sacred entities. The Sarna, also known as Adi Dharam, followers celebrate various rituals and festivals to please deities associated with natural elements. Their festivals are inclusive and gender-neutral and promote peaceful coexistence with nature. Their festivals and rituals revolve around the agricultural calendar and the cycles of nature. It is a religion based on an oral tradition where the knowledge and beliefs are transmitted through myths, stories, and rituals due to lack of any written scripture like the Bible or Quran.

### **Sarna Religion and Environmental Conservation:**

One of the significant features of Sarnaism is the worship of sacred groves. Such pious worshippers of nature allow no harm to the trees and wildlife. The traditional belief of the Sarna adherents is that if anyone harm the sacred tress, it will cause misfortune, disease and disaster for the community.

**A list of pious groves (trees/plants) are given below:**

Number	Local name	Botanical name	Family
1	Indian plum	<i>Ziziphus mauritiana</i> Lam.	Rhamnaceae
2	White Marudah	<i>Terminalia arjuna</i> (Roxb.)	Combretaceae
3	Indian gooseberry	<i>Phyllanthus emblica</i>	Phyllanthaceae
4	Tulsi	<i>Ocimum sanctum</i>	Lamiaceae
5	Sal	<i>Shorea robusta</i>	Dipterocarpaceae
6	Peepal	<i>Ficus religiosa</i>	Moraceae
7	Bargad	<i>Ficus bengalensis</i>	Moraceae
8	Behara	<i>Terminalia belerica</i>	Combretaceae
9	Neem,	<i>Azadirachta indica</i>	Meliaceae
10	Mango	<i>Mangifera indica</i>	Anacardiaceae
11	Malabar nut	<i>Adhatoda vasica</i>	Acanthaceae
12	Thorn apple	<i>Datura stramonium</i>	Solanaceae
13	Champak	<i>Magnolia champaca</i>	Magnoliaceae
14	Indian black plum	<i>Syzygium cumini</i>	Myrtaceae
15	Tamarind	<i>Tamarindus indica</i>	Fabaceae
16	Bael	<i>Aegle marmelos</i>	Rutaceae

**Table: List of major sacred groves (Singhal et al 2021)**

For them, trees are the abode of spirits and gods who ensure their people's safety and persistence. These tribal communities set apart sanctified land to propitiate the vanadevatas, i.e. tree spirits. In certain groves, the entire vegetation is considered sacred and is worshipped. These traditions don't just signify spiritual and cultural expression of the local tribes but also speak of the unique ways in which they conserve and preserve biodiversity.

### **Religious Beliefs, Festivals, and Ritual Ceremonies Promoting Conservation:**

The festivals of Sarna religion are nature centric and through their rituals the Sarna tribal communities play a significant role in the conservation of nature. During the celebrations of festivals, the followers of Sarnaism take oaths of protecting nature, i.e. land, river and forest and transfer their indigenous cultural traditions and customs to the future generations to protect nature.

### **Marriage Ceremonies:**

Sarna followers conduct their marriage ceremonies beneath the canopy of revered trees such as Sal (*Shorea robusta*), Karam (*Adina cordifolia*), Amla (*Emblica officinalis*) and Kendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), considering them sacred entities. Symbolising their significance, bhelwa (*Semecarpus anacardium*), mango, bamboo, and sidha (*Legerstromieia parviflora*) branches are planted at the marriage site. Sal leaves are utilised for ceremonial worship, serving

as leaf cups and plates. Each sacred tree holds distinct beliefs: mango symbolises the continuity of descendants, bamboo represents reproduction, sidha signifies loyalty between spouses, bhelwa provides protection from the evil eye, and mahua is linked to love in marital relationships. The inclusion of these trees is integral to the completeness of the marriage ritual. The marriage ceremony is deemed incomplete without the inclusion of sacred trees and plants in the ritual. These enduring traditional practices are the inherent parts of Sarna culture and considered favourable and balanced measures for the protection and conservation of flora and fauna in their natural habitat.

### **Sarhul Festival:**

Sarhul is a festival that celebrates the interconnectedness of nature and humanity, highlighting the significance of environmental conservation and harmonious coexistence with the Earth. It is observed in the months of March and April, during which Sarna tribes engage in worship of the Sal tree. The Sal tree holds sacred significance among tribal communities and it is revered during the festival. Individuals present rice, flowers, and fruits as a gesture of reverence towards the tree. During the festival time, tribes refrain from harvesting any part of the Sal tree and contribute to the enhanced regeneration. Consequently, they are also protecting Sal and other associated trees from fires since wildfires also peak during these months.

### **Karam Festival:**

The Karam festival centres around the veneration of the Karam tree (*Adina cordifolia*) and is celebrated in October. The festival aims to enhance the agricultural yield. Karam festival is a prominent example of tree worship practiced by Sarna followers in the central and eastern regions of India. During the Karam festival, people worship Karamsani, represented by a special twig called Karma dal. Karamsani is considered the goddess of plants, fertility, and destiny. An interesting aspect of the festival is the intentional protection of the Karam tree (*Adina cordifolia*) and its related species. Sarna tribes avoid cutting down the Karam tree until the festival season, thus playing a crucial role in preserving and regenerating these trees.

### **Faggu:**

Faggu is celebrated with the aim of ensuring a bountiful crop on the full day of the month of Phagun (March-April). Prior to this day, young boys and other members of the village gather firewood, hay, dry grass, and dry leaves at a designated spot in the village. On the full day of Phagun, they assemble, and the village priest (Pahan) conducts a worship ceremony before setting fire to the hay with the hope of a prosperous crop. During this period Sarna tribes collect dry wood and leaves from the forests, and remarkably this practice occurs at a time when the risk of wildfires is high across the country. The act of gathering these dry materials by the tribes

reduces the fuel load, significantly lowering the likelihood of wildfires. Consequently, this festival plays a crucial role in preventing or mitigating the initiation of wildfires and contributes significantly to the conservation of the forest ecosystem.

All of the above-mentioned festivals, each carrying significant beliefs of the Sarna religion, are celebrated throughout the year. Sarna philosophy revolves around a profound connection with nature and a commitment to peaceful coexistence, referring to nature as “mother” and worshiping it. The Sarna religion actively promotes environmental conservation and emphasises practices that foster harmony with nature.

### **Sarna Religion in a Modern Context:**

In recent times, the Sarna community has increasingly found common ground with modern conservation efforts. The sacred groves, once preserved solely based on traditional beliefs, now attract attention from environmentalists, scientists, and conservationists. Collaborations have emerged to study the rich biodiversity within these groves and understand how indigenous practices contribute to ecological balance. The unique rituals and practices observed during festivals have become subjects of interest for researchers seeking sustainable conservation models.

The combination of Sarna traditions with modern technology reflects a dynamic response to conservation challenges. While sacred groves remain central to Sarna philosophy, technology is used to document and share knowledge about these practices. Digital platforms educate a broader audience on the significance of sacred groves, fostering understanding of Sarna environmental values. In environmental monitoring, Sarna communities embrace tools like satellite imaging and data analytics to assess grove health and target conservation efforts. This integration allows for a strategic approach to protection, complementing traditional methods. However, balancing tradition and technology requires careful consideration to preserve Sarna core values. Sarna religion serves as a unique example of how ancient traditions can collaborate with contemporary environmental awareness and technology.

### **Major Obstacle: Fight For A Legal Recognition:**

Over the past decade, Sarna followers across the country have been consistently struggling for the official recognition of their religion within the Indian constitution. This plea arises from the need to safeguard their distinctive culture, traditions, and faith from conversion into mainstream religions. The rapid rise of capital-oriented development has led to the Sarna community feeling left behind, making them susceptible to conversion by mainstream religions under the guise of socio-economic upliftment. The absence of a specific religious code for them in the Indian

constitution fuels their ongoing protests, as they strive for constitutional recognition to preserve their pristine culture, traditions, and their identity.

### **Conclusion and Future Prospects:**

Indeed, Sarna practices hold a great significance towards environment conservation and creating sustainable ecosystem practices. Sarna offers a unique perspective on the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature, providing valuable insights for modern environmentalists. The sacred groves, various cultural festivals, worshipping of nature, and work on their conservation each present a model for sustainable environment management that could be applied beyond the confines of the community. In this case, environmental organizations and policymakers have a valuable opportunity to collaborate with the Sarna community to integrate these time-tested practices into broader conservation strategies. As societies seek innovative and culturally sensitive approaches to conservation, the Sarna-inspired practices stand ready to contribute to a more sustainable and interconnected future.

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