

Sacred Groves of India

What are Sacred Groves? Sacred groves are communally protected forests which usually have a significant religious connotation for the protecting community.

A sacred grove also called sacred forest comprises patches of natural vegetation from a few trees to several acres. The spaces of these sacred groves are protected by local communities because of their religious beliefs and traditional rituals that run through several generations.

Sacred Groves - Background

1. In India, Respect for nature has been influenced by religious belief and indigenous practices. Even, today there exist some tribes in the remote hilly areas, whose livelihood are fully dependent on forest resources and their traditional practices conserved a large number of wild plant species for various reasons e.g. food, fiber, shelter or medicine.
2. Developmental activities that are taking place and changes in attitude of people in terms of religious beliefs and indigenous practices bring heedless actions towards the forest.
3. Thus, leading to shrinking biodiversity and degradation of forest at an alarming rate.
4. However, there are some patches of forest, which are left untouched because of social fencing by local people. These types of forest bring the concept of “sacred groves”.

Sacred Groves - Overview

1. Sacred groves are a tract of virgin forest that are protected traditionally by the local communities as a whole and a harbour rich in biodiversity.
2. The area of sacred groves ranges from a few square meters to several hectares.
3. Sacred Groves are dedicated to local deities or tree spirits.
4. People believe that any kind of disturbance will offend the local deity, causing diseases, natural calamities or failure of crops.
5. The degree of sanctity accorded to the sacred groves varies from one area to another. In some forests, even the dry foliage and fallen fruits are not touched.
6. Sacred groves have been legally protected under ‘community reserves’ in the [Wildlife \(Protection\) Amendment Act, 2002](#).
7. Hunting and logging are usually strictly prohibited within these patches.

Threats to Sacred Groves

The threats associated with sacred forests vary from one region to the other and even from one forest to the other. Some common threats identified are:

1. Disappearance of the traditional belief systems (as are now considered mere superstition) but were fundamental to the concept of sacred forests.

2. Rapid urbanization and developmental activities such as roads, railways tracks, dams including commercial forestry have been destroying various sacred forests.
3. Encroachment has led to the shrinkage of some of the large forests
4. The transformation of the primitive forms of nature worship into formal temple worship
5. Invasion by exotic weeds is a serious threat to some groves.
6. Pressures due to increasing livestock and fuelwood collection.

Significance of Sacred Groves

1. The sacred grove is a traditional method used by Tribal people to conserve the local forest and to worship the local Deities.
2. Sacred groves help in the protection of a number of rare, endangered and endemic species. Check out [IUCN Red List](#) to know more on such species.
3. Sacred groves are important repositories of flora and fauna diversity that have been conserved by local communities in a sustainable manner.
4. The vegetation cover of the sacred groves improves the soil stability of the area and also prevents soil erosion.
5. The sacred groves are often associated with ponds, streams or springs, which support the water requirements of the local people. Thus, the vegetative cover of sacred groves helps in recharging the aquifers.

List of Sacred Groves of India

Sacred Groves in India are often associated with temples, monasteries, shrines or with burial grounds. Among the largest sacred groves of India are the ones in Hariyali, near Gauchar in Chamoli District of Uttarakhand, and the Deodar grove in Shipin near Shimla in Himachal Pradesh.

Given below is the State-Wise list of Sacred Forests in India along with the number of sacred groves embraced by each state.

List of Sacred Groves in India	
State / Union Territories	Number of Sacred Forests
Andhra Pradesh	750
Arunachal Pradesh	58
Assam	40
Bihar	43 ---
Chhattisgarh	600
Goa	93--
Gujarat	29

Haryana	57
Himachal Pradesh	329
Jammu & Kashmir	92---
Jharkhand	29
Karnataka	1476
Kerala	1500 approx.
Madhya Pradesh	170---
Maharashtra	1600
Manipur	365---
Meghalaya	125
Odisha	322
Puducherry	108 ---
Rajasthan	560
Sikkim	56
Tamil Nadu	448
Telangana	65
UttaraKhand	133
Uttar Pradesh	32
West Bengal	670

Brief Details of Important Sacred Groves

Andhra Pradesh -

1. Well preserved groves, Less disturbed, rich flora and fauna are preserved to a great extent, and are subjected to anthropogenic pressures.
2. Thimmamma marrimanu - the largest banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*) in the world is seen in Andhra pradesh at Gooty Bailu village.
3. Local Term of sacred Groove - Pavithra Vana

Tamil Nadu -

1. Local Term for Sacred Groves - Kovikaadugal, Swami Shola, Koil Kadu, Kattu Koil, Vanakkoil.

2. The deities associated with the groves are Aiyanar, Sastha, Muniswaran Karuppuswami, Vedappar, Andavar and Amman.
3. Most of the sacred groves in Tamil Nadu are associated with reservoirs, ponds, springs or streams
4. The groves in Tamil Nadu are the repositories of medicinal plants.

Odisha -

1. Local term for grooves - Jahera, Thakuramma
2. Deities to whom these groves are dedicated are Jhakeri, Gram Siri, Gossa Pennu, Pitabaldi, Loha Penu, Gaisri and Pat Baram.
3. Alligam, Maulimaa, Bhairabguda, Dudhari, Mali Dusara and Kanta Basunsuni are some sacred groves in Odisha dedicated to Deities.
4. Sacred groves of Odisha harbours some unique socio-cultural plants like *Saraca asoca*, *Mesua ferrea*, *Memecylon umbellatum*, *Michelia champaca*, *Bombax ceiba*, *Murraya paniculata*, *Couroupita guianensis* etc.

Arunachal Pradesh -

1. In Arunachal Pradesh, a few of the sacred groves managed by Lamas and the Mompa tribe, are attached to the Buddhist monasteries: they are called Gompa Forest Areas (GFAs).
2. Banyan, Pipal, Ashoka, Bela and Harada are among the most commonly found plant species in the sacred groves.
3. These sacred groves are dedicated to local deities such as Ubro or Ubram and Thouw-gew.

Assam -

1. There is a taboo in the groves on killing of deer during their mating season and protection is extended to birds during the nesting period.

Bihar -

1. The sacred groves of Bihar are found mainly in the Chotanagpur area in the southern part of the state. Known as sarnas, the groves are still thickly covered with huge deciduous trees.
2. Local term for groves - Sarhuli Mander
3. The groves in Bihar are fairly small.
4. Full of creepers, shrubs and grasses, these grooves are generally collected in the Chotanagpur region.

Chhattisgarh -

1. Local Term for groves - Matagudi, Devgudi and Gaondevi

Goa -

1. The best preserved sacred groves of Goa are situated in Keri village of Sattari.
2. A unique feature is the offering of terracotta animals in the groves.
3. Deities to which sacred groves of Goa are dedicated are Durgah and Rashtroli.
4. Local terms for groves are Deorai, Pann.
5. Devachi Rai of Kopardem, Holyechirai of Caranzol and Nirankarachirai of Bambar are Some of the important sacred groves of Goa.

Gujarat -

1. The vegetation in the sacred groves of Gujarat is highly varied and comprises mangroves, freshwater swamps, or other tropical forest types.
2. Local Terms such as Sabarkantha, Dahod, and Banaskantha are used for the groves.

3. The groves are dedicated to Khodiyar mata, Oran Mata, Jhalai mata, Panch Krishna, Mahadev.
Haryana -

1. Local terms for grove is Gurudwara grove
2. The groves act as a repository for medicinal plants and as a source of honey, fruits and water.
3. Common plant species found in haryana sacred groves are White Pear, Mandarin, Bruisewort, Garden Violet, Lac tree, Elm, Pipal, and Banyan.

Himachal Pradesh -

1. The thick forests of the grooves provide a good habitat for leopards, barking deer, ghorals, black bears, hares, wolves and many more animals.
2. Deodar, Kail and Oak, with occasional Spruce and Silver fir, are commonly found plant species.
3. Local terms used for several grooves are Dev Vana.

Jammu & Kashmir -

1. The sacred grooves in Jammu & Kashmir are known as Banis.
2. Indian plum, Mountain ebony, Pipal, Three-leaved Caper, White Fig, Bengal quince and Neem are plant species found commonly in J&K.

Jharkhand -

1. Sarana or Jaherthan are the local terms for groves in Jharkhand.
2. Sarna is a cluster of trees where the adivasis worship on various occasions.
3. The sarhul festival is celebrated in the sarhul sarana when the sal trees start flowering.
4. Non-tribal Hindus called Mandar also worship in such Sarnas in many villages of Jharkhand.

Karnataka -

1. The groves in Karnataka broadly come under two classes: Smaller groves are called Kans that are entirely protected.
2. Larger groves are known as Devarkadu or Devarkan which function as resource forests, offering both sustenance and ecological security.
3. A unique feature in these groves is the offering of terracotta hounds in the groves of Kodagu.
4. Local terms for these groves are Huli devarakadu, Nagavan, Bhatappavana, Jatakappan bana, Ghodi Bana, etc.

Kerala -

1. Some of the trees such as Borassus, Alstonia scholaris, Antiaris toxicaria, Hopea parviflora, Strychnos nux-vomica, Ficus religiosa etc are being worshipped in many sacred groves.
2. The size of the sacred grove in Kerala varies as small as one cent to 20 or more hectares.
3. In the southern region of the state, the mangroves swamps like Myristica fatua, M.malabarica, Hydnocarpus spp and Eugenia spp are found in the poorly drained sacred groves. They develop high profile humidity in the surroundings.
4. Kavu and Sarp Kavu are the local terms for groves.

Madhya Pradesh -

1. Sharana, Devkot, Matikot, Devsthal, Budhadev are the local names used for the sacred groves in M.P.
2. Sacred groves in Jhabua and Alirajpur districts shelter rare, endangered and threatened species of plants.

Maharashtra -

1. The sacred groves in the western part are called Devrai or Devrahati whereas in the east, the Madiya tribals call them Devgudi.
2. Sacred groves form an important landscape feature in the deforested hill ranges of the Western Ghats.
3. Indian laurel, Indian Elm, Bead tree, Indian butter tree, Turmeric and Japanese ginger are among common plant species found here.

Manipur -

1. Manipuri sacred groves are locally known as Gamkhap and Mauhak (sacred bamboo reserves).
2. Because of their associated deities, the worship and protection of forests called Umanglai, are still practiced by the modern Manipuris to preserve their ancient traditions.
3. Some deities to whom sacred groves of Manipur are dedicated are Umanglai, Ebudhou Pakhangba, Chabugbam, etc.
4. Ecologically valuable species like Siris and Cluster fig, which conserve high amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus, magnesium and calcium in their leaves, are found in several sacred groves of Manipur.

Meghalaya -

1. The groves in Meghalaya are a unique feature of Khasi and Jaintia Hills.
2. Mawphlang sacred grove, located in East Khasi hills District, 25 km from Shillong is an internationally known and important tourist destination and educational centre. It is spread across 78 hectares and protected by the local deity-Labasa.
3. Local terms for groves are Ki Law Lyngdoh, Ki Law Kyntang, Ki Law Niam.
4. Groves are living examples of the strong symbiotic relationship between the forests and indigenous tribal population of the state.

Puducherry -

1. Local names of groves in Puducherry are Kovil Kaadugal and Ayyappan Kaavu.
2. Groves vary in size from 0.2 to 5.0 hectare in around the temples.
3. Some deities to whom these groves are dedicated include Aiyandar, Pachai Vazhi Amman, Poraiyathamman, etc.

Rajasthan -

1. The vanis of Mewar, the kenkris of Ajmer, the orans of Jodhpur, Jaisalmer and Bikaner and the shamlat dehs of Alwar constitute the sacred groves of Rajasthan.
2. Cutch tree, Indian mesquite, Mukul myrrh tree, Salvia leaved cross berry, Indian tree of heaven, are among the plant species in the sacred groves.
3. The orans, filled with khejarli trees (*Prosopis spicigera*), deer, blackbuck and nilgai (Blue Bull), are sacred to Bishnois.
4. The Bishnoi women gave up their lives to protect the trees, giving rise to the Chipko movement.
5. Local terms for groves are Vani, Malvan, Kenkri, Orans, Shamlat deh, Devabani, Jogmaya.

Sikkim -

1. Sacred Groves in Sikkim are attached to Buddhist monasteries.
2. The highlands of Demojong below the Khangchendzonga peak are the most sacred sites.
3. Groves in Sikkim are called Gumpa Forest Areas and are managed by Lamas.

Telangana -

1. The Mallur Gutta (Hill) of Warangal district in Telangana state, India, is reputed as a habitat for medicinal plants.

Uttarakhand -

1. The sacred groves of Uttarakhand serve as a gene pool and are a source of rich plant diversity.
2. Local terms for Uttarakhand sacred groves are Deo Bhumi and Bugyal (sacred alpine meadows).
3. Practising ritual and traditions in groves play a crucial role in fostering threatened species such as the Griffon vulture (*Gyps himalayensis*).

Uttar Pradesh -

1. Grooves here hold special significance in improving the soil fertility through biomass build-up, efficient nutrient cycling, conserving soil moisture and providing a deeply penetrating root system with soil-binding properties.
2. Local terms for groves is Dev Van.
3. Banyan, Cluster fig, Pipal, Indian Elm, Ceylon Ironwood and India Jalap are common plant species.

West Bengal -

1. Grantham, Haritan, Sabitritan, Jahera, Deo Tasara and Mawmund are the terms used for groves locally.
2. The sacred grove represents the unique fragments of the respective species' gene pool.
3. Sitala, Garam, Manasa, Devimani (lady of the grove) and Makali are the deities to whom these groves are dedicated.