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Sacred Groves in India-Preserved Forest Fragments

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ABSTRACT: Sacred groves of India are forest fragments of varying sizes, which are communally protected, and which usually have a significant religious connotation for the protecting community. Hunting and logging are usually strictly prohibited within these patches.^[1] Other forms of forest usage like honey collection and deadwood collection are sometimes allowed on a sustainable basis. NGOs work with local villagers to protect such groves. Traditionally, and in some cases even today, members of the community take turns to protect the grove.^[2] The introduction of the protected area category community reserves under the Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act, 2002 has introduced legislation for providing government protection to community held lands, which could include sacred groves.

KEYWORDS: sacred groves, community, reserves, forest fragments, wild life, government, deadwood

I. INTRODUCTION

Around 14,000 sacred groves have been reported from all over India, which act as reservoirs of rare fauna, and more often rare flora, amid rural and even urban settings. Experts believe that the total number of sacred groves could be as high as 100,000. Threats to the groves include urbanization, and over-exploitation of resources. While many of the groves are looked upon as abode of Hindu deities, in the recent past a number of them have been partially cleared for construction of shrines and temples.^{[3][4]} Sacred groves are places of yatra (pilgrimage) in Indian-origin religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism.

Indian sacred groves are often associated with temples, monasteries, shrines, pilgrimage sites, or with burial grounds. Historically, sacred groves find their mentions in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist texts, from sacred tree groves in Hinduism to sacred bamboo groves and sacred deer parks in Buddhism for example.^[5] Sacred groves may be loosely used to refer to natural habitat protected on religious grounds. Other historical references to sacred groves can be obtained in *Vrukshayurveda* an ancient treatise, ancient classics such as Kalidasa's *Vikramurvashiiya*. There has been a growing interest in creating green patches such as *Nakshatravana* grove.

One of the most important traditional uses of sacred groves was that it acted as a repository for various Ayurvedic medicines. Other uses involved a source of replenishable resources like fruits and honey. However, in most sacred groves it was taboo to hunt or chop wood. The vegetation cover helps reduce soil erosion and prevents desertification, as in Rajasthan. The groves are often associated with ponds and streams, and meet water requirements of local communities. They sometimes help in recharging aquifers as well.

In modern times, sacred groves have become biodiversity hotspots, as various species seek refuge in the areas due to progressive habitat destruction, and hunting. Sacred groves often contain plant and animal species that have become extinct in neighboring areas. They therefore harbor great genetic diversity. Besides this, sacred groves in urban landscapes act as "lungs" to the city as well, providing much needed vegetation cover.

Typically, sacred groves in Indian-origin religions are associated with the concept of a *presiding deity*. Often these sacred deities are numerous nature spirits and guardians associated with Hindu, Jain and Buddhist deities, such as nature spirits known as Yakshas (numerous nature spirits), Nāgas (serpent guardians) and guardian tutelary deities (like *ayyanar* and *amman*) are also known. There are over 1000 deities associated with sacred groves in the states of Kerala and Karnataka alone. A large number of distinct local art forms and folk traditions are associated with the deities of sacred groves, and are an important cultural aspect closely associated with sacred traditions. Ritualistic

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dances and dramatizations based on the local deities that protect the groves are called *Theyyam* in Kerala and *Nagmandalam*, among other names, in Karnataka. Often, elaborate rituals and traditions are associated with sacred groves,^[6] as are associated folk tales and folk mythology.

The Hindu tradition considers forests to be of three types - *Tapovan*, *Mahavan* and *Sreevan*. *Tapovan* are forests associated with penance (*Tapas*), and are inhabited by saints and *rishis*. *Mahavan* refers to the grand natural forests. *Tapovan* and *Mahavan* are considered to be a *Raksha* ("sanctuary") for flora and fauna as ordinary human beings are not allowed to enter these forests. *Sreevan*, which means, "forests of the goddess of prosperity", consists of dense forests and groves. From the former, people would collect dry wood, leaves, forest produce and a limited amount of timber, though natural ecosystem would not be unnecessarily disturbed. Groves were considered as spaces of forests from where harvesting could be done. Sometimes, specific trees like mango trees could be planted and nurtured here. Groves were associated with religious rites, festivals and recreation. Typical recreational activities associated with these groves included *jhoolal jhoolan*.^[7] In the villages, *Panchavati*, or a cluster of five trees that represented the forests, were maintained. These trees represented the five elements of Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Space.^[7]

Planting and nurturing of trees has been a highly evolved practice in ancient India.^[8] *Vrukshayurveda*, the science of plant life and also a 10th-century treatise of that title on the subject ascribed to Surapala, dealt with various species of trees and their growth. Verses 9-23 from this text indicate how mystical beliefs and conservation of ecology was interconnected.

A person is honored in Vaikuntha for as many thousand years as the days they reside in a house where tulasi is grown. And if one properly grows bilva, which pleases Lord Siva, in their family, the goddess of riches resides permanently passes on to the sons and grandsons

One who plants even a single asvattha, wherever it may be, as per the prescribed mode, goes to the abode of Hari.

One who has planted dhatri has performed several sacrifices. They has donated the earth. They would be considered a liberated soul forever.

One who plants a couple of banyan trees as per the prescribed mode would go to the abode of Siva.

After planting neem trees a person well-versed in dharma attains the abode of Sun. Indeed! One resides there for a long period.

By planting four plaksa trees a person doubtlessly obtains the fruits of Rajasuya sacrifice.

One who plants five or six mango trees attains the abode of Garuda and lives happily forever like gods.

One should plant seven palasa trees or even one. One attains the abode of Brahma and enjoys the company of gods by doing so.

One who personally plants eight udumbara trees or even prompts someone to plant them, rejoices in the lunar world

One who has planted madhuka has propitiated Parvati, has become free from diseases, and has worshipped all deities.

If one plants ksirini, dadimi, rambha, priyala, and panasa, one experiences no affliction for seven births.

One who has knowingly or unknowingly planted ambu is respected as a recluse even while staying in the house.

By planting all kinds of other trees, useful for fruits and flowers, a person gets a reward of thousand cows adorned with jewels.

By planting one asvattha, one picumanda, one nyagrodha, ten tamarind trees, the group of three, viz., kapittha, bilva, and amalaka, and five mango trees, one never visits hell.^[8]

II. DISCUSSION

Sacred groves are scattered all over the country, and are referred to by different names in different parts of India. Sacred groves occur in a variety of places – from scrub forests in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan maintained by the Bishnois, to rain forests in the Western Ghats of Kerala. Himachal Pradesh in the north and Kerala in the south are specifically known for their large numbers of sacred groves.^[9] The Gurjar people of Rajasthan have a unique practice of neem (*Azadirachta indica*) planting and worshipping as abode of God Devnarayan. Thus, a Gurjjar settlement appears like a human-inhabited sacred grove.^[10] Similarly Mangar Bani, last surviving natural forest of Delhi is protected by Gurjars of nearby area.^[11] 14,000 sacred groves have been reported from all over India, which act as reservoirs of rare

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fauna, and more often rare flora, amid rural and even urban settings. Experts believe that the total number of sacred groves could be as high as 100,000.^{[12][4]}

It is estimated that around 1000 km² of unexploited land is inside sacred groves. Some of the more famous groves are the *kavus* of Kerala, which are located in the Western Ghats and have enormous biodiversity; and the *law kyntangs* of Meghalaya – sacred groves associated with every village (two large groves being in Mawphlang^[13] and Mausmai) to appease the forest spirit. 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 Simla in Himachal Pradesh. Seeing the importance of sacred groves and other sacred natural sites in having conserved biodiversity all across the Himalayas, the intergovernmental organization ICIMOD developed and published a framework in 2016, to assess the present day significance of such sites for their integration into formal conservation and development frameworks.^[14]

All numbers are quoted from the records of the *C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre* of the Government of India. Starred numbers are likely to increase. The centre also maintains a complete list of identified sacred groves in India, most of which is online.^[15]

State	No of groves	Local name	References
Andhra Pradesh	691	<i>Pavitraskhetralu</i>	Kailash C. Malhotra et al. ^[16]
Arunachal Pradesh	65	<i>Gumpa forests</i> (since attached to monasteries)	Dudley et al. ^[17]
Assam	40	<i>Than, Madaico</i>	
Chhattisgarh	600*	<i>Sarna, Devlas, Mandar, Budhadev</i>	
Goa	NA*		SERBC document ^[18]
Gujarat	42*		[19]
Haryana	248	<i>Beed or Bid (बीड़), Bani (बणी), Bann (बण), Janglat (जंगलात), Shamlat (शामलात)</i>	

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State	No of groves	Local name	References
Himachal Pradesh	329	<i>Dev Kothi, Devban, Bakhu Devban</i>	[20]
Jharkhand	21*	<i>Sarna</i> more than 500 " Jaherthan" in Godda of Jharkhand	Marine Carrin [21]
Karnataka	1424	<i>Devarakadu, Devkad</i>	Gadgil et al.[22]
Kerala	2000	<i>Kavu, Sarpa Kavu</i>	M. Jayarajan [23]
Maharashtra	2820	<i>Deorai/Devrai</i> (Pune, Ratnagiri, Raigarh, Kolhapur Sindhudurg, Ahmednagar, Thane districts)	Waghchaure et al.[24] Envis[25]
Manipur	365	Umang Lai, <i>Gamkhap, Mauhak</i> (sacred bamboo reserves)	Khumbongmayum et al.[26]
Meghalaya	79	<i>Law Kyntang, Law Lyngdoh</i>	Upadhyay et al.[27]
Orissa	322*	<i>Jahera, Thakuramma</i>	
Puducherry	108	<i>Kovil Kadu</i>	Ramanujam et al.[28]
Rajasthan	9*	<i>Oran</i> (Jaiselmer, Jodhpur, Bikaner), <i>Kenkri</i> (Ajmer), <i>Vani</i> (Mewar), <i>Shamlat deh, Devbani</i> (Alwar), <i>Jogmaya</i>	
Sikkim	56	<i>Gumpa forests</i> (since attached to monasteries)	S. S. Dash [29] Dudley et al.[17]
Tamil Nadu	503	<i>Kovil Kadu</i>	M. Amrithalingam [30]
Telangana	65		Kailash C. Malhotra et al.[16]
Uttarakhand	18*	<i>Devbhumi, Baun, Bugyal</i> (sacred alpine meadows)	Anthwal et al.[31]

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State	No of groves	Local name	References
West Bengal	670*	<i>Garamthan, Harithan, Jahera, Sabitrithan, Santalburithan</i>	R. K. Bhakat [32]

III. RESULTS

Sarpa Kavvu: A Sarpakkavu or Snake Grove is a kind of holy grove found in Kerala. Kavvu is the traditional name given for Sacred groves across the Malabar Coast in Kerala, South India.^[33] Kavus are notable for Theyyam, the centuries-old ritual dance.

Umang Lai (literally, "Forest Deities"): A form of holy Sacred grove found in Manipur.^{[34][35]} There are more than 365 Umang Lais, affiliated to the ancient religion of Sanamahism, which exists in various regions scattered across the Northeastern state of Manipur since ancient times. The holy as well as religious festival of Lai Haraoba is celebrated especially in regards of these holy sacred groves.^[36] The accounts of these holy sacred groves are found in the ancient Manipuri Manuscript named Karthong Lamlen. Interestingly, Manipur stands 8th rank among all the Indian States and 1st rank for North East India, for having highest number of sacred groves across the country.

Threats to the grove include urbanization, over-exploitation of resources (like overgrazing and excessive firewood collection), and environmental destruction due to religious practices. Other threats to the sacred groves include invasion by invasive species, like the invasive weeds *Chromolaena odorata*, *Lantana camara* and *Prosopis juliflora*.

A sacred tree is a tree which is considered to be sacred, or worthy of spiritual respect or reverence. Such trees appear throughout world history in various cultures including the ancient Greek, Hindu mythology, Celtic and Germanic mythologies. They also continue to hold profound meaning in contemporary culture in places like Japan (*shinboku*), Korea (*dangsan namu*), India (bodhi tree), and the Philippines, among others. Tree worship is core part of religions which include aspects of animism as core elements of their belief, which is the eco-friendly belief that trees, forests, rivers, mountains, etc have a life force ('anime' i.e. *alive*) and need to be conserved and used in a sustainable manner. An example of the continued importance of sacred trees in contemporary urban culture is the 700-year old camphor growing in the middle of Kayashima Station. Locals protested against moving the tree when the railway station had to be expanded, so the station was built around it.^[1] The sacred Banyan tree is the national tree of India, and the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha is said to have meditated in Bodh Gaya, is also revered as sacred.

Sacred trees are some times planted in the sacred groves, which can also have other type of trees too.^[2]

In the Dharmic (Indian-origin) religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, the ecology, such as trees, rivers, fauna, and mountain, is sacred and revered objects of worship. There are numerous sacred groves of India. In Hindu belief, the Kalpavriksha is a wish granting tree. In addition to the Panchvati trees described below, other sacred trees include species such as the Akshayavat (sacred fig tree), Banana leaf, Kadamba, Parijaat, and Sandalwood. The Bodhi Tree (banyan) is specially revered, and there are numerous large banyan trees in India. Matsya Purana, a Hindu text, has a Sanskrit language shloka (hymn), which explains the importance of reverence of ecology in Hinduism. It states, "A pond equals ten wells, a reservoir equals ten ponds, while a son equals ten reservoirs, and a tree equals ten sons."^[6] Panchavati, are groves of five trees sacred to Indian-origin religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Panchvati has five types of sacred trees, however there are more than five types of trees which are considered sacred and form the part of panchavati. Sacred trees used in panchavati are the Vata (ficus benghalensis,

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Banyan), Ashvattha (*ficus religiosa*, Peepal), Bilva (*aegle marmelos*, Bengal Quince), Amalaki (*phyllanthus emblica*, Indian Gooseberry, Amla), Ashoka (*Saraca asoca*, Ashok), Udumbara (*ficus racemosa*, Cluster Fig, Gular), Nimba (*Azadirachta indica*, Neem) and Shami (*prosopis spicigera*, Indian Mesquite).^{[7][8]}

Forests Department, Haryana has initiated a state-wide program to plant panchavati groves in each village, which will be planted along the temples, ponds, and common land. From 2021, land was identified in village for planting these groves which will be looked after by the villagers. Within each grove the peepal will be planted in the east, peepal will be planted in the east, banyan in north, bel in centre, amla in west and ashoka tree in south.^[8]

The sacred fruits and plants include the Bael, Kusha grass, Tulsi (see Tulasi chaura and Tulsi Vivah), flowers such as Lotus, Champaka, coconut, paan (betal leaf), banana leaf, etc are also sacred. Tulsi in India is cultivated for religious and traditional medicine purposes, and also for its essential oil. It is widely used as a herbal tea, commonly used in Ayurveda, and has a place within the Vaishnava tradition of Hinduism, in which devotees perform worship involving holy basil plants or leaves. The sacred flowers include the Lotus, Champaka and Marigold.

Trees are significant in many of the world's mythologies, and have been given deep and sacred meanings throughout the ages. Human beings, observing the growth and death of trees, and the annual death and revival of their foliage,^{[1][2]} have often seen them as powerful symbols of growth, death and rebirth. Evergreen trees, which largely stay green throughout these cycles, are sometimes considered symbols of the eternal, immortality or fertility. The image of the Tree of life or world tree occurs in many mythologies.^[3]

Examples include the banyan and the sacred fig (*Ficus religiosa*) in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil of Judaism and Christianity. In folk religion and folklore, trees are often said to be the homes of tree spirits. Germanic mythology as well as Celtic polytheism both appear to have involved cultic practice in sacred groves, especially grove of oak.^[citation needed] The term *druid* itself possibly derives from the Celtic word for oak. The Egyptian Book of the Dead mentions sycamores as part of the scenery where the soul of the deceased finds blissful repose.^[4]

The presence of trees in myth sometimes occurs in connection to the concept of the sacred tree and the sacred grove. Trees are an attribute of the archetypical *locus amoenus*.^[5]

Numerous popular stories throughout the world reflect a firmly-rooted belief in an intimate connection between a human being and a tree, plant or flower. Sometimes a man's life depends upon the tree and suffers when it withers or is injured, and we encounter the idea of the external soul, already found in the Ancient Egyptian *Tale of Two Brothers* from at least 3000 years ago. Here one of the brothers leaves his heart on the top of the flower of the acacia and falls dead when it is cut down. Sometimes, however, the tree is a mysterious token which shows its sympathy with an absent hero by weakening or dying, as the man becomes ill or loses his life. These two features very easily combine, and they agree in representing to us mysterious sympathy between tree and human life.^[1]

Sometimes the new-born child is associated with a newly planted tree with which its life is supposed to be bound up; or, on ceremonial occasions (betrothal, marriage, ascent to the throne), a personal relationship of this kind is instituted by planting trees, upon the fortunes of which the career of the individual depends. Sometimes, boughs or plants are selected and the individual draws omens of life and death. Again, a person will put themselves into relationship with a tree by depositing upon it something which has been in close contact with them, such as hair or clothing.^[1]

Often a tree will be associated with oracles. The oak of Dodona was tended by priests who slept on the ground. Forms of the tall oaks of the old Prussians were inhabited by gods who gave responses, and so numerous are the examples that the old Hebrew terebinth of the teacher, and the terebinth of the diviners may reasonably be placed in this category. In Greek myth, oak trees are said to be inhabited by spirits or nymphs called hamadryads, and if they were cut down by mortals, the gods punished them since the beings in the trees were believed to die.^[8] Important sacred trees are also the object of pilgrimage, one of the most noteworthy being the branch of the Bo tree at Sri Lanka brought thither before the Christian era. The tree spirits will hold sway over the surrounding forest or district, and the animals in the locality are often sacred and must not be harmed.^[1]

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The custom of transferring disease or sickness from men to trees is well known. Sometimes the hair, nails, clothing, etc. of a sickly person are fixed to a tree, or they are forcibly inserted in a hole in the trunk, or the tree is split and the patient passes through the aperture. Where the tree has been thus injured, its recovery and that of the patient are often associated. Different explanations may be found of such customs which naturally take rather different forms among peoples in different grades.^[1]

In Arab folklore, sacred trees are haunted by jinn; sacrifices are made, and the sick who sleep beneath them receive prescriptions in their dreams. Here, as frequently elsewhere, it is dangerous to pull a bough. This dread of damaging special trees is familiar: Cato instructed the woodman to sacrifice to the male or female deity before thinning a grove, while in the Homeric poem to Aphrodite the tree nymph is wounded when the tree is injured, and dies when the trunk falls.^[1]

Early Buddhism held that trees had neither mind nor feeling and might lawfully be cut; but it recognized that certain spirits might reside in them, such as Nang Takian in Thailand. Propitiation is made before the axe is laid to the holy trees; loss of life or of wealth and the failure of rain are feared should they be wantonly cut; there are even trees which it is dangerous to climb. The Talein of Burma prays to the tree before he cuts it down, and the African woodman will place a fresh sprig upon the tree.^[1] In Hawaiian tradition, a tree either located at the end of a valley or on a cliff near the sea, is used by the soul as a gateway to the Underworld (AKA Pit of Milu).^[9] Some Ancient Indian tree deities, such as Puliyaivalaiyamman, the Tamil deity of the tamarind tree, or Kadambariyamman, associated with the kadamba tree were seen as manifestations of a goddess who offers her blessings by giving fruits in abundance.^[10]

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Sacred space, sacred ground, sacred place, sacred temple, holy ground, or holy place refers to a location which is deemed to be sacred or hallowed. The sacredness of a natural feature may accrue through tradition or be granted through a blessing. One or more religions may consider sacred locations to be of special significance. Often, such locations either are or become the home of sanctuaries, shrines, places of worship, or locations conducive to meditation. Regardless of construction or use, these areas may have a variety of ritual or taboo associations - including limitations on visitors or on allowed actions within the space. Such places may become the focus of pilgrimage, drawing pilgrims from great distances, or simply locations of significance for the local populace.

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