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A review on the sacred groves: Its conservation and protection in Chhattisgarh

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Abstract
This review article attempts to study and analyze biodiversity and conservation, including exploring and implementing the so-called protected area by the small communities "Sacred Groves" declared by a group of people over a century ago. Sacred groves show that these small forest patches are important in biodiversity conservation. Additionally, natural sacred sites are preserved through traditional community-based conservation methods that do not require government involvement. Numerous anthropological studies on tribal communities provide insight into the tradition of SGs (Sacred groves) in Chhattisgarh. These sacred groves are crucial for preserving countless rare, endangered, and threatened species. Most sacred groves are deep within forests or at the top of dense plateaus. In the Bastar region, there are three kinds of SGs: *Matagudi, Devgudi,* and *Gaondevi*. Different tribes have their specific deity referred to as Mata or *Gaondevi*, which is honored in *Devgudi*. The current review article studies various types of sacred groves in three regions of Chhattisgarh – Sarguja, Kanker, and Bastar. Emphasizing their cultural and ecological importance. Of the total, six groves (approximately 26%) are found in Sarguja, seven groves (around 30%) in Kanker, and 10 groves (about 44%) in Bastar.

Keywords: Biodiversity, sacred groves, indigenous, nature, conservation

Introduction
In India, as in many regions around the globe, various communities engage in different forms of nature reverence. One prominent custom involves safeguarding forest areas dedicated to deities or ancestral spirits. These areas of forest are referred to as sacred groves (SGs). The concept of SGs is ancient and was once prevalent in many regions worldwide. Over 50,000 SGs have been documented across various parts of India. SGs represent a significant aspect of India's heritage and are vital to the religious and socio-cultural fabric of tribal communities. SGs function as ecosystems on their own and fulfill all ecological roles. Numerous threatened, endangered, and rare species find protection within SGs. These groves serve as reservoirs of biological diversity for the nation. However, this institution is exhibiting signs of decline in its cultural significance and biological integrity. These groves are typically found naturally near villages and temples, and local communities preserve them through social customs and restrictions. These practices reflect the deep spiritual beliefs and environmental tribes of the people who protect them (Malhotra. *et al*, 2001) [11].

Due to the diverse array of habitats and species, community-based conservation initiatives are incredibly varied. In indigenous societies, natural ecosystems like forests, rivers, and lakes are often protected by designating them as sacred. This is frequently linked to ancestor worship, tree spirit worship, and the veneration of holy landscapes. In Chhattisgarh, for instance, sacred groves are known as Sarna, Matagudi, Devgudi, and Gaondevi. The groves of northern Chhattisgarh are dedicated to deities such as "Andhari pat", Chala Pachao, Sarna Burhia, Sarna Mata, Mahadania, and Budhadev. These protected areas are vital because they preserve species heavily harvested from surrounding forests, including sal, bija, tendu, and saja (Patnaik and Pandey, 1998; Pandey, 2000) [13, 12]. This is a cultural and effective way to preserve these plants in their native habitats. Sacred groves are found across India and are known by different names in various regions. They are predominantly located in states such as Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, West

Bengal, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Manipur, and Meghalaya. There is a pressing need to document and study these remaining groves and the species they protect. Furthermore, it is crucial to support the tribes associated with these groves to ensure the continued conservation of these vital cultural and ecological sites.

Approximately 14,000 sacred groves have been documented throughout India, although their actual number may reach as many as 100,000. These sacred groves play a significant role in preserving endemic and endangered plant and animal species. Research also highlights the contributions of tribal communities to the protection of these groves, thereby supporting forest conservation and biodiversity, while acknowledging various tribal customs linked to these groves. Tribes honor the sacred plants and animals they sing and dance in the groves during festivals. Moreover, these groves serve as a vital resource for the tribes, providing them with essential items such as fuel-wood, small timber, fodder, medicines, and food etc. Therefore, strategies for conserving forests and biodiversity should involve the tribes and their sacred groves (Kumar, 2016) [9].

In India, sacred groves are found throughout the country, with a significant presence along the Western Ghats and the central plateau in states like Kerala, Karnataka, and Chhattisgarh, among others. Although there has not been a comprehensive study on the sacred groves across the entire nation, experts estimate that their total number in India could range between 100,000 and 150,000. In Chhattisgarh, approximately 600 sacred groves require protection and conservation (Ekka, 2018) [6]. Sacred groves, a widespread phenomenon found in various cultures around the globe, are frequently linked to religious and cultural practices and play a crucial role in preserving biodiversity and natural environments without facing scrutiny. These sacred groves function as self-sustaining ecosystems that protect endemic, endangered, and threatened species, medicinal plants, and diverse cultivars. The most well-documented ecological benefit of sacred groves is their ability to conserve water and soil, preventing flash floods and ensuring water availability during dry seasons in the deserts of Rajasthan. Facing challenges such as fragmentation, urban development, and excessive exploitation, these groves now require governmental support to survive, such as the establishment of the 'Protected Area Category Community Reserves' through the Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act of 2002 (Agarwal, 2016) [1].

Sacred groves, though known by different names across India and managed for various reasons by local communities, serve as crucial islands of biodiversity. They protect numerous plant and animal species, including rare, threatened, and endemic (Sharma, 2003) [15]. These groves act as natural repositories and nurseries for medicinal plants used in Ayurvedic, Unani, tribal, and other folk medicine systems. Many of these plants have been carefully screened and have even found their way into modern medicine. Numerous studies have documented the significant role sacred forests play in preserving many medicinal plant species across India (Pandit & Bhakat, 2007) [4]. The distribution of sacred groves in the country has been depicted as follows:-

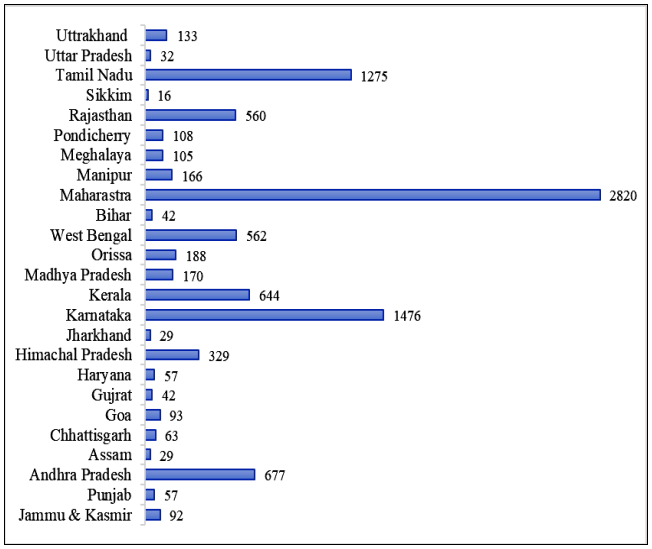

Fig 1: Distribution of sacred groves in the country (Source: Forest department state campa fund)

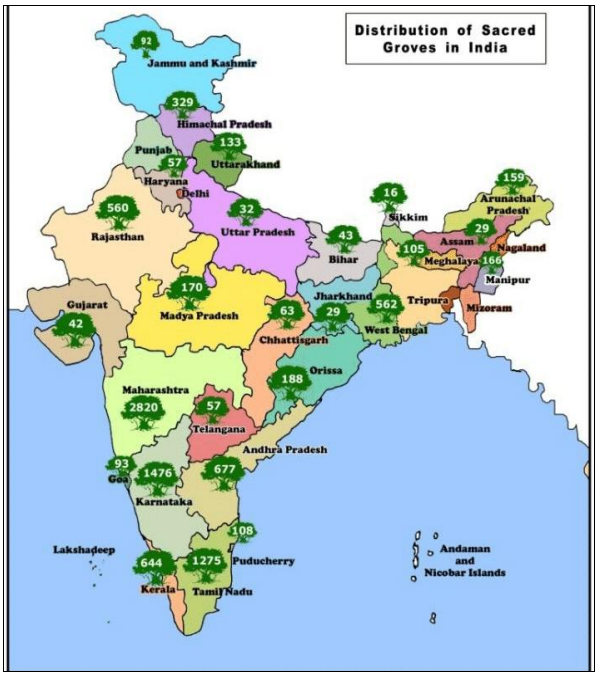

Fig 2: Distribution of sacred groves in the country (Source: Ekka, 2018) [6]

Historical Origins

Although the details regarding the origins and evolution of sacred groves differ by region, they commonly reflect themes of respect for nature, spiritual importance, and the preservation of culture. Let us delve into the historical beginnings and evolution across various areas.

Sacred groves have been an integral part of India's landscape for millennia, predating organized religions. Known by various names such as Devara Kadu in Karnataka, Kavu in Kerala, and Devrai in Maharashtra, these groves were revered by indigenous and tribal communities as a dwelling for deities, spirits, and ancestors. In Hinduism, they are often associated with worshiping Vanadevatas (forest deities) and dedicated to gods and goddesses like Shiva, Vishnu, or Devi, serving as sites for rituals and ceremonies that nurture a deep spiritual connection with nature. The conservation of these groves has been upheld for generations through traditional governance systems, including customary laws, taboos, and community agreements that forbid any exploitation or disturbance (Trehan, & Trehan, 2024) [17].

Protection and conservation of sacred groves -

Sacred groves are structured with a core and a buffer zone to safeguard their medicinal and religious significance. Conservation and protection plans are prepared, outlining activities such as fencing, afforestation, and creating community shade areas. These plans must be approved by the local community, including priests, and the services of a local anthropologist must be utilized if available. Once prepared at the village level, the conservation plan is then approved by the concerned divisional forest officer.

Threats and degradation of scared groves

Beliefs and taboos are the traditional cornerstones of sacred grove conservation, but their decline has led to grove deterioration (Vartak & Gadgil, 1976; Tiwari *et al*., 1998) [7, 16]. The present status of these groves is precarious due to the erosion of these religious practices and mounting human pressures. Development activities, urbanization, resource exploitation, and population growth pose significant threats. The ancient integrity of many groves has been compromised (Malhotra *et al*., 2001) [11]. However, the specific nature and extent of these threats vary widely and are often unique to each region and even to individual groves (Malhotra *et al*., 2001) [11].

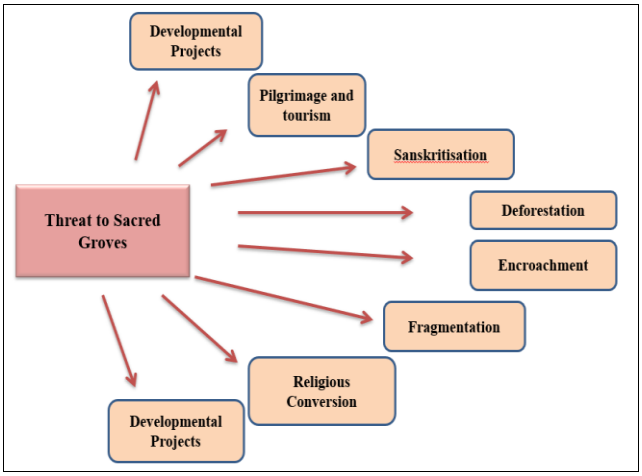

Fig 3: Threats to sacred grooves (Source: Lokare, *et. al*.2022) [10]

Table 1: Flora Associated with the God/Goddess and Other Unseen Powers.

S.No.	Tree/plants	Botanical name	Status	Associated with gods/goddesses
1	Akh	*Calotropis procera*	Threatened	Shiva
2	Amla	*Emblica officinalis*	N/A	Laksmi
3	Amaltas	*Cassia fistula*	N/A	Krishna, Vishnu
4	Amati/kachnar	*Bauhinia malabarica*	Threatened	Ram
5	Anjan	*Hardwickia binnata*	N/A	Fertility cult
6	Arjun	*Terminalia arjuna*	Near Threatened	Vishnu
7	Ashwagandha	*Withania somnifera*	Rare	Fertility cult
8	Asoka	*Saraca indica*	Endangered	Buddha,indra
9	Bahera	*Terminalia bellirica*	Threatened	Vishnu, Fertility cult
10	Bael	*Aegle marmelos*	Vulnerable	Mahesver,spirits
11	Bhelwa	*Semecarpus anacardium*	Endangered	Spirits
12	Bhirra	*Chloroxylon swietenia*	Vulnerable	Fertility cult
13	Bija	*Pterocarpus marsupium*	Endangered	Shiva,Vishnu
14	Chandan	*Santalum album*	Endangered	Vishnu, shiva, brahma
15	Char	*Buchanania lanzan*	Low risk	Krishna, Fertility cult
16	Dhatura	*Datura alba*	N/A	Shiva,Krishna
17	Dhawda	*Anogeissus latifolia*	N/A	Fertility cult
18	Giloy	*Tinospora cordifolia*	Vulnerable	Fertility cult
19	Gilmohar	*Delonix regia*	N/A	Shiva
20	Hajari	*Plumeria rubia*	N/A	Lakshmi, Vishnu
21	Haldu	*Adina cordifolia*	N/A	Vishnu, Fertility cult
22	Harra	*Terminalia chebula*	Near threatened	Vishnu, Fertility cult
23	Imli	*Tamarindus indica*	N/A	Spirits,witches
24	Jamun	*Syzygium cuminii*	N/A	Fertility cult
25	Jungle jalebi	*Pithecolobium dulce*	N/A	Krishna
26	Kadamba	*Anthocephalus cadamba*	N/A	Krishna, Fertility cult
27	Kala siris	*Albizia lebbeck*	N/A	Fertility cult
28	Kalihari	*Gloreosa superb*	Endangered	Fertility cult
29	Kapok	*Ceiba pentandra*	N/A	Fertility cult
30	Karanj	*Pongamia pinnata*	Least corcern	Krishna,spirits
31	Karpur	*Hedychium spicatum*	Near threatened	Moon
32	Karra	*Cleistanthus collinus*	Vulnerable	Spirits
33	Khamar	*Gmelina arborea*	Least concern	Shiva

(Chandrakar, *et al*., 2014) [5]

Different Places Where Sacred Groves are Present in Chhattisgarh

SARGUJA

There are numerous sacred groves in Chhattisgarh, but in the Sarguja region, there are six major types of sacred groves. The prominent tree varieties include Bhelwa, Beeja, Mahua, Asna, Tendu, Char, Sal, Dhavana, and Chandan are ethnobotanically tree species commonly used in sacred groves in Sarguja district. Locally, the sacred groves in Sarguja are called Phool, Sarhul, Kadamara, Mahadani, Buddhadev, and Mandar. The Sarana sacred groves are primarily located in the Sarguja area of Chhattisgarh state.

Table 2: Sacred Groves found in Sarguja District of Chhattisgarh

S.No.	Name of the sacred groves	Name of tree species	Family	Deity	Area (Ha)
1	Phool Sarna	Sal (*Shorea robusta*)	Dipterocarpaceae	Sarna Bhuria	0.2-1.5
2	Sarhul Sarna			Sarna Bhuria	0.5-2
3	Kadamara			Andhari Pat	0.5-14
4	Mahadani	Tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*)	Ebenaceae	Mahadania	2-21
5		Chandan (*Santalum album*)	Santalaceae		
6	Buddhadev	Mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*)	Sapotaceae	Buddha dev	Not known
	Mandar	Dhavara (*Annogeissus latifolia*)	Combretaceae	Gohel	0.2-2

(Source: Ekka. 2018) [6]

BASTAR

Bastar is a district inhabited by tribes in Chhattisgarh, where approximately 67% of the population comprises tribal individuals, representing 26.76% of the overall tribal population in Chhattisgarh. Each tribal group possesses its unique culture, and the various tribal communities adhere to their traditional ways of life.

In the Bastar region, the tribes did not harm or fall the trees in Deogudis (sacred groves) and their adjacent areas. The tribal communities conduct various traditional religious ceremonies and rites within these groves. There are a total of 22 sacred groves found in the Bastar area of Chhattisgarh. Gonds, Murias, Halba, and Maria tribes are predominantly present near these sacred groves. The Gonds protect 11 groves, the Murias manage 3, the Halbas take care of 5, and the Marias oversee 3 groves. Usually, the village priest chooses the locations for establishing a deogudi and conducts the 'matri pooja.' Tribes gather and plant herbs, shrubs, climbers, and trees that are used for medicinal purposes within the groves. The deities worshipped include Adomara, Amalodaka, Bhumhunga, Bhumi Hiria, Chingraj, Kondraj, Raopan, Tikapraj, Mudia, Lord Vidhyadharan, Lord Brahma, Lord Brahaspati, Lord Shiva, Serpent King, and Lord Narayan. These deities are associated with various plants such as *Aegle marmelos* (Bel), *Adina cordifolia* (Haldu), *Azadirachta indica* (Neem), *Bombax cieba* (Semal), *Caryota urens* (Sulphi), *Citrus medica* (Nimbu), *Calotropis gigantea* (Madar), *Ficus bengalensis* (Bargad), *F. religiosa* (Pipal), *Madhuca longifolia* (Mahua), *Mangifera indica* (Aam), *Ocimum sanctum* (Tulsi), *Terminalia tomentosa* (Harra), *Shorea robusta* (Sal), among others, which are planted as it is believed that gods inhabit them. Tribal communities venerate many plants based on their cultural and ritual practices and work to conserve them in the sacred groves situated close to their homes.

(Source: by the author during the interview and field visit 2025)

Fig 4: Sacred groves of Bastar District, Chhattisgarh

Table 3: Trees worshiped with magico-religious belief- gods reside in trees.

S.No.	Tree species	Local Name	Family	Goddess residing	Area of deogudi (ha.)	Deogudi village	District
1	*Dendrocalamus strictus*	Bans	Poaceae	Firatin Mata	1.4	Keshkal	Bastar
2	*Mangifera indica Linn.*	Aam	Anacardiaceae	-	0.2	Navapara (Kondagaon)	Bastar
3	*Cassia fistula Linn.*	Amaltas	Caesalpiniaceae	Raopan	0.6	Keshlur (Narainpur)	Bastar
4	*Mangifera indica Linn.*	Aam	Anacardiaceae	Banjari Mata	3.5	Jharanigud (Jagdalpur)	Bastar
5	*Shorea robusta Gaerth.f.*	Sal	Dipterocarpaceae	Tikapraj	1.5	Sukma	Bastar
6	*Terminalia chebula Retz.*	Harra	Combretaceae	Mudia	5.0	Bhasramgarh	Bastar
7	*T. arjuna Linn.*	Arjun	Combretaceae	Lord Brahma	2.7	Keshkal	Bastar
8	*Ficus religiosa*	Peepal	Moraceae	Lakshmi mata	0.7	Adawal	Bastar
9	*Shorea robusta*	Sal	Dipterocarpaceae	Jalni mata	1.5	Kalaguda	Bastar
10	*Bixa orellana*	Sindoor	Bixaceae	Jalni mata	0.5	Tiriya	Bastar

(Source Rajiv *et al*. 2008)

KANKER

Kanker district is located in the southern region of the state of Chhattisgarh. Over 100 sacred groves are found in the Kanker district of southern Chhattisgarh. These groves are crucial for conserving many rare, endangered, and threatened species. Most are located deep within forests or atop plateaus, protected by their remote locations. The local tribal communities in Kanker maintain a strong belief in the deities that inhabit these groves. This spiritual connection is fundamental to the groves' preservation. This paper reviews the sacred groves of the Kanker district, detailing the diverse flora and fauna they protect and the rich social and cultural traditions tied to them. Since the dawn of civilization, humans have revered plants, and this practice has ensured the conservation of genetic resources. These plants are invaluable to tribal communities, providing them with food, medicine, and materials for cultural practices.

1. Rajarajeshwari Devi 2. Thakur Dai,Gondahur, Pakhanjur

3. Aanga dev,Bondanar 4. Thakur Dai, Khad

Fig 5: Sacred groves of Kanker District (Source: Hemrom and Sharma, 2015) [8]

Table 4: Sacred Groves found in Kanker District of Chhattisgarh.

S. No.	Tree species	Family	Name of the Sacred grove	Area (ha.)	Village	District
1	*Terminalia tomentosa*	Combretaceae	Nageshwar Dev	206	Surhi	Kanker
2	*Anogeissus latifolia*	Combretaceae	Kapat dai	206	Surhi	Kanker
3	*Terminalia tomentosa*	Combretaceae	Thakur Baba	-	Balbani	Kanker
4	*Pterocarpus marsupium*	Legumes	Kari rao	100	Kariyapahar	Kanker
5	*Dalbergia Sissoo*	Legumes	Kwaanrpath baba	50.68	Dimarpani	Kanker
6	*Lannea coromandelica*	Anacardiaceae	Gadhiya Dev	40	Navdabri	Kanker
7	*Azadirachta indica*	Mahogany	Shitala mata	-	Risewada	Kanker

(Source Hemrom and Sharma, 2015) [8]

Conclusion

Sacred groves in Chhattisgarh are vital for their role in conservation and protection, preserving ethnobotanical species, and maintaining the rural healthcare, rituals, and socio-religious values of local tribes. These groves are crucial for conserving numerous medicinal and endangered plant species, acting as gene banks and habitats for wildlife and birds. Many species now extinct elsewhere are well-preserved within these groves. Given the ongoing threat of deforestation, especially in the context of global warming, it is essential to implement strict protective measures. Long-term survival depends on awareness generation, participatory management, and a thorough evaluation of these plant resources. Ultimately, sacred groves are a critical component of our planet's life support system, making it imperative to understand their current state, structure, and function to develop effective conservation strategies.

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