

# The Case of Sacred Groves in India

ANWESHA BORTHAKUR

Sacred groves have survived very long without human interference, and thus are of anthropological, cultural, economic, and ecological significance. In India, these groves are concentrated in the North-East and along the Western Ghats, both globally recognised hotspots of biodiversity. Unfortunately, their size and number are now shrinking at an alarming rate, and it is high time a workable solution is found to sustain them.

Anwasha Borthakur ([anwasha227@gmail.com](mailto:anwasha227@gmail.com)) is a research scholar at the Centre for Studies in Science, Technology and Innovation Policy, Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar.

Sacred groves are patches of forests or natural vegetation that are dedicated to local folk deities or ancestral and tree spirits. These groves are of significance from the point of view of anthropology, culture, the economy, and ecology. Sacred groves are conserved and protected by local communities because of their religious beliefs and the traditional rituals associated with them, which run through several generations. They may consist of multi-species, multi-tier primary forests or a clump of trees, depending on the history of the vegetation (Gokhale et al 2001). According to Hughes and Chandran (1998), these groves are segments of landscape containing vegetation and other forms of life and geographical features that are delimited and protected by human societies under the belief that to keep them in a relatively undisturbed state is expressive of the relationship of humans with the divine or with nature. Such groves, which can range from a few trees to forestland of several acres, are often located in biodiversity-rich regions. In India, they are concentrated in the North-East and all along the Western Ghats, both globally recognised hotspots of biodiversity.

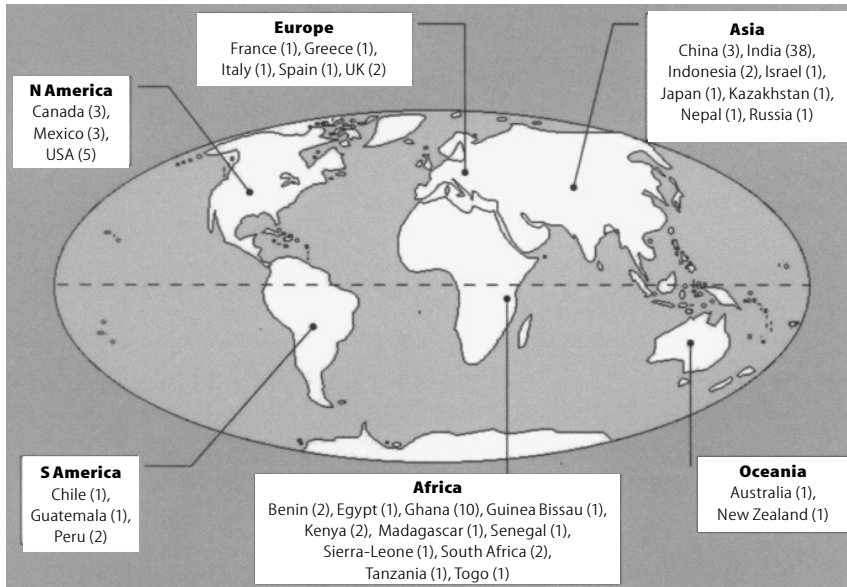
Inhabited by a large number of indigenous communities, who have their own unique sets of beliefs and practices, India has a huge and valuable traditional knowledge base. The country still has many forms of nature worship, which have been passed down from generation to generation. All forms of life from sedges to fig trees, and from crabs to peacocks and tigers continue to be regarded as sacred and inviolable by a variety of primitive cults (Gadgil and Vartak 1976). Sacred groves comprise natural or near-natural vegetation, preserved by local communities through social taboos and sanctions, and they reflect the spiritual and ecological ethos of these communities.

Sacred groves have been reported in all the continents except Antarctica (Bhagwat and Rutte 2006). Map 1 (p 26) shows natural sacred sites in six continents with the numbers in parentheses indicating the total number in each country.

The map shows that India has the highest number (38) of such sites within its geographical boundary. However, other studies indicate that their number in the country is very much higher, with a number of states reporting the existence of many sacred groves and beliefs associated with them. Table 1 (p 26) provides a state-wise distribution of sacred groves in India.

In many traditional societies all over the world, taboos frequently influence the way humans conduct themselves in relation to the natural environment

**Map 1: Worldwide Distribution of Natural Sacred Sites**



Source: Bhagwat and Rutte (2006).

**Table 1: Distribution of Sacred Groves in India**

State	Number
Andhra Pradesh	750
Arunachal Pradesh	58
Assam	40
Chhattisgarh	600
Gujarat	29
Haryana	248
Himachal Pradesh	5,000
Jharkhand	21
Karnataka	1,424
Kerala	2,000
Maharashtra	1,600
Manipur	365
Meghalaya	79
Orissa	322
Rajasthan	9
Sikkim	56
Tamil Nadu	448
Uttarakhand	1
West Bengal	670
Total	13,720

Source: Gokhale et al (2001).

(Colding and Folke 2001). Such taboos exist in cultures across the globe, and they are good examples of informal institutions governing human interaction with the environment – social norms, rather than government laws and rules, enforce decent behaviour. All forms of vegetation, including shrubs and creepers, in a sacred grove are believed to be under the protection of the reigning deity of that particular grove. In most cases, even the removal of deadwood from such groves is forbidden. The people believe that any kind of disturbance that offends

the local deity will cause disease, natural calamities, or crop failure. For example, the Garo and the Khasi tribes of the north-eastern state of Meghalaya prohibit human interference of any kind in their sacred groves. Astonishingly, in spite of many changes in the socio-cultural, religious and economic spheres in the past few decades, these groves have been able to withstand anthropogenic pressure and most of them are still found to be in a good condition throughout the state (Tiwari, Barik and Tripathi 1998).

The extent of the sacredness of groves differs from one to another. While in some of the forests even dry foliage and fallen fruits are not touched, in others, deadwood and dried leaves can be gathered.

Nevertheless, in both cases, live trees and branches are never cut. Gadgil and Vartak (1976) suggest that sacred groves originated in the hunting-gathering stage of human social evolution. If so, they have been around for several centuries – perhaps from before the 6th century, when agriculture was probably introduced to the Western Ghats region. These sacred groves have been responsible for fostering the rich rain forests of the Western Ghats with their tremendous biological diversity.

As befits the beliefs of hunter-gatherers, the deities of sacred groves are fierce, and when aroused, apt to punish offenders with nothing less than death (Gadgil and Vartak 1976). Gadgil and Vartak observe that there are innumerable stories of people’s experiences of this in all contexts.

About 30 years ago, some worshippers of Moleshwar in Javali taluka in Maharashtra decided to construct a temple for the god. Although this deity tolerates a shelter, he could not tolerate the wood for the temple being procured by felling of a tree within the sacred grove. The worshippers nevertheless decided to take a chance and started felling a jambul (*Syzygium cumini*) tree for timber. The tree came down much before expected and instantaneously killed all the three woodcutters ... In the grove at Dapsare in Velhe taluk, while a man was trying to smoke out a Varanus lizard from a hole in a tree trunk, the tree caught fire accidentally and was killed. The person fell violently ill, and escaped death only by placating the deity with the sacrifice of a goat (1976).

On the other hand, a deity permitted the felling of a tree for timber when the

**EPW E-books**

Select EPW books are now available as e-books in Kindle and iBook (Apple) formats.

The titles are

- Village Society** (ED. SURINDER JODHKA)  
(<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00CS62AAW> ;  
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/village-society/id640486715?mt=11>)
- Environment, Technology and Development** (ED. ROHAN D’SOUZA)  
(<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00CS624E4> ;  
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/environment-technology-development/id641419331?mt=11>)
- Windows of Opportunity: Memoirs of an Economic Adviser** (BY K S KRISHNASWAMY)  
(<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00CS622GY> ;  
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/windows-of-opportunity/id640490173?mt=11>)

Please visit the respective sites for prices of the e-books. More titles will be added gradually.

whole village of Mangavn in Velhe taluk in Maharashtra was burnt down by fire (Gadgil and Vartak 1976). There are thus reasons to believe that the majority of local people have been complying with the taboos related to sacred groves, at least until recently. The taboos may, however, have been violated under extreme compulsion, or sometimes by outsiders who were either not aware of them or not afraid of them.

A practice related to the sacred groves in the Western Ghats is that of "inam groves". These are groves in which no deity is believed to reside, and they are preserved for the use of priests of the deity in the area. The priests are allowed to derive an income from the fruit and other produce of the grove, but they can in no other way disturb it.

### Current Scenario

Unfortunately, India's sacred groves are now in danger. Their size and number, along with their residual biodiversity, is shrinking at an alarming rate. Dense sacred forests of yore are fast turning sparse and bare. And sparse and bare ones are soon turning into degraded wastelands with little ecological value.

The sacred groves in the biodiversity-rich areas of the country are of immense importance to maintaining their ecological balance. Access to sacred groves and interference in them was culturally restricted, thereby reducing the human impact of harvesting natural resources. The consequence was that sacred groves evolved as important reservoirs of biological diversity, permitting a complex and diverse array of ecological processes to continue uninterrupted over a long period of time (Gokhale et al 2001). With the degradation of sacred groves, a large number of ecologically significant, rare, endemic, endangered, and threatened species of plants and animals are disappearing. For example, *Syzygium travancoricum*, an endemic tree in the low-level evergreen forests of Kulathupuzha (south Kerala), has been totally eliminated from its locality (ibid).

Since Independence, the taboos associated with sacred groves have been on the wane. Removal of deadwood and

leaf litter has now become a common practice in many sacred grove regions. In some cases, villagers even seem to depend on sacred groves as their source of fuel. However, the removal of live wood is still taboo in most groves, which is nevertheless weakening.

Several factors are responsible for the destruction of sacred groves. A significant one is the so-called belief system. Young people of indigenous communities tend to accord less value to their traditional beliefs and rituals. In many cases, they find it impossible to take concepts such as folk deities or ancestral and tree spirits seriously. Being educated and modern means considering the economic benefit of sacred groves, disregarding their cultural, religious and ecological significance. For example, the younger generation wants to sell timber from sacred groves to make full use of what they believe they traditionally own. The lure of short-term economic gain is thus posing a serious threat to the natural resource base, including sacred groves.

More importantly, the loss of traditional values is the biggest threat to sacred groves. In the absence of such beliefs, it is very difficult to protect these areas without the intervention of the government. "Inam groves" have become most vulnerable because they have no deities residing in them. If these groves are protected with the help of the government, the traditional communities relying on them will end up being deprived of some of their rights. There have been several instances in the past few decades of local people losing their customary rights of forest management to the government. When this happens, in the course of time, sacred groves are destroyed for development activities or encroached on by the people.

Many sacred groves are situated near temples or places of religious significance. Tourism and pilgrimage activities in such areas have an adverse effect on the groves.

### Conclusions and Suggestions

Sacred groves are of immense biological, ecological, cultural, anthropological and economic significance. However, this

valuable resource faces several threats and there is an urgent need to act to save them from further destruction. Comprehensive plans for their conservation have to be prepared in each state and implemented at the earliest so that these treasure houses of plants and animals are not lost forever (Tiwari, Barik and Tripathi 1998). Such plans will require information on the extent of sacred forests in a state, their biological content, cultural importance, and the extent of managerial intervention needed. An initiative from the government is imperative to ensure the preservation of sacred groves in India.

If the beliefs associated with sacred groves and the traditional wisdom on forest protection can be suitably integrated with modern scientific forest management practices, the sacred groves could become useful models of biodiversity conservation (Tripathi 2001). The education system ought to provide appropriate respect and value to traditional knowledge systems, and show how an urban culture can be built in harmony with local tradition.

### REFERENCES

- Bhagwat, Shonil A and Claudia Rutte (2006): "Potential for Biodiversity Management", *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 4 (10), pp 519-24.
- Colding, Johan and Carl Folke (2001): "Social Taboos: 'Invisible' Systems of Local Resource Management and Biological Conservation", *Ecological Applications*, 11 (2), pp 584-600.
- Gadgil, Madhav and V D Vartak (1976): "The Sacred Groves of Western Ghats in India", *Economic Botany*, 30 (2), pp 152-60.
- Gokhale, Yogesh, Kailash C Malhotra, Sidipto Chatterjee and Sanjeev Srivastava (2001): "Cultural and Ecological Dimensions of Sacred Groves in India", Indian National Science Academy, New Delhi, and Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal.
- Hughes, J D and M D S Chandran (1998): "Sacred Groves around the Earth: An Overview" in P S Ramakrishnan, K G Saxena and U M Chandrashekhara (ed.), *Conserving the Sacred for Biodiversity Management* (New Delhi, Kolkata: Oxford and IBH Publishing), pp 69-86.
- Tripathi, R S (2001): "Sacred Groves: Community Biodiversity Conservation Model in North-East India" in K N Ganeshaiah, R U Shaanker and K S Bawa (ed.), *Tropical Ecosystems: Structure, Diversity and Human Welfare*, Supplement, ATREE, Bangalore, pp 104-07.
- Tiwari, B K, S K Barik and R S Tripathi (1998): "Biodiversity Value, Status and Strategies for Conservation of Sacred Groves of Meghalaya, India", *Ecosystem Health*, 4, pp 20-32.