



Sacred Groves and Biodiversity Conservation

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<http://www.gjirp.org/> || Vol. 2 No. 3 (2026): August Issue

Date of Submission: 01-07-2026

Date of Acceptance: 15-07-2026

Date of Publication: 05-08-2026

Abstract— Sacred groves, patches of forest protected by local communities on religious and cultural grounds, represent one of the world's oldest forms of in-situ biodiversity conservation. India alone is estimated to contain well over 100,000 such groves, distributed across the Western Ghats, the Himalayan foothills, central India, and the northeastern hill states, where they persist as relict patches of native vegetation embedded within otherwise heavily modified agricultural and settled landscapes. This paper reviews the scientific literature on sacred groves as biodiversity conservation instruments, drawing on foundational ecological surveys, landscape-scale conservation biology research, and social-science studies of community governance published in peer-reviewed journals. The review synthesises evidence on the species richness and ecological functions of sacred groves, the cultural and institutional mechanisms, religious belief, taboo, and customary governance, that have sustained their

protection over generations, and the mounting pressures of legal ambiguity, weakening social sanction, and land-use change that now threaten their persistence. The findings indicate that sacred groves function as genuine reservoirs of biodiversity, often harbouring species and vegetation types poorly represented in the formal protected area network, but that their long-term survival depends on the continued vitality of the belief systems and community institutions that created them, resources that are increasingly eroded by socio-economic transformation. The paper concludes that integrating sacred groves into formal conservation planning, while respecting the customary institutions that sustain them, offers a cost-effective and culturally grounded complement to India's protected area system.

Keywords—sacred groves, biodiversity conservation, traditional ecological knowledge, community-based natural resource management, Western Ghats, India



Introduction

Sacred groves are tracts of forest, ranging from small clumps of a few trees to several hundred hectares, that are protected by local communities because of their association with a deity, ancestor spirit, or sacred narrative, rather than through formal statutory designation. They are found across many parts of the world, from West Africa and Ethiopia to Japan, the eastern Mediterranean, and South Asia, but India is widely recognised as having one of the highest concentrations of such sites, with estimates suggesting the country may contain well over 100,000 sacred forests distributed across nearly every state. Because access to and use of these groves is governed by religious belief and customary taboo rather than by forest department regulation, many have remained relatively undisturbed for generations, even as the agricultural and settled landscapes surrounding them have been extensively transformed.

Source: <https://www.pmfias.com/sacred-groves/>

The scientific study of sacred groves as a conservation phenomenon began in earnest in the mid-1970s, when ecologists first systematically documented their distribution and biological value across India, and has since grown into a substantial interdisciplinary literature spanning botany, conservation biology, anthropology, and environmental policy. This literature has established that sacred groves frequently harbour disproportionately high levels of species richness, including rare, endemic, and medicinally important plants, relative to surrounding disturbed or state-managed forest land, and that they can provide meaningful ecosystem services such as water regulation, soil conservation, and carbon storage. At the same time, researchers have increasingly emphasised that sacred groves cannot be understood purely as ecological phenomena: their persistence depends fundamentally on the social and religious institutions, taboos on hunting and logging, restrictions on entry, and customary governance structures, that communities have maintained around them, and these institutions are themselves under growing strain from urbanisation, migration, changing religious practice, and inconsistent legal recognition.

This paper reviews the peer-reviewed literature on sacred groves and biodiversity conservation, with particular attention to the Indian context, in order to assess the ecological significance of sacred groves, the cultural and institutional mechanisms that sustain their protection, and the threats and policy gaps that now confront them. In doing so, it aims to provide an integrated account of why sacred groves matter for biodiversity conservation and what is required to secure their future.



Fig. 1: Sacred Groves in India

Literature Review

The foundational scientific documentation of sacred groves in India was undertaken by Gadgil and Vartak, whose 1975 paper in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society first made a systematic case for the continued conservation of sacred groves, arguing that these community-protected forest patches represented a valuable and underappreciated component of India's biological heritage. Their subsequent 1976 study of sacred groves in the Western Ghats, published in the journal Economic Botany, extended this documentation, cataloguing groves across the region and situating the tradition within a broader comparative context that included similar practices recorded in parts of the Middle East and East Asia. These early studies established the basic premise that would guide subsequent research: that religious sanction, rather than formal legal protection, had functioned as an effective, low-cost mechanism for conserving forest patches over long periods of time.

Building on this foundation, later ecological studies sought to quantify the biodiversity value of sacred groves more precisely. Khan, Khumbongmayum, and Tripathi, in a widely cited 2008 overview published in the International Journal of Ecology and Environmental Sciences, synthesised findings from sacred grove studies across India's major regions, Western Ghats, central India, and the northeast, and concluded that sacred groves function as reservoirs of biodiversity that preserve species and vegetation types increasingly rare outside their boundaries, while also serving as living repositories of cultural, religious, and ethnic heritage. A parallel body of site-specific floristic research reinforced this picture: a study of sacred groves in the Jaintia Hills of northeastern India, published in Biodiversity and Conservation, documented substantial vascular plant diversity within these community-protected forests, while research on sacred groves in Meghalaya recorded several hundred plant species across surveyed sites, including species considered rare or endangered within the state. Comparative studies have also examined how sacred groves perform relative to formally protected areas: research published in Current Science by Boraiah, Vasudeva, Bhagwat, and Kushalappa compared informally managed sacred groves with state-managed reserve forests in the Western Ghats and found that the informally managed sacred groves supported higher richness and better regeneration of medicinal plant species, a finding that directly challenged assumptions that formal state protection necessarily outperforms community-based custodianship.

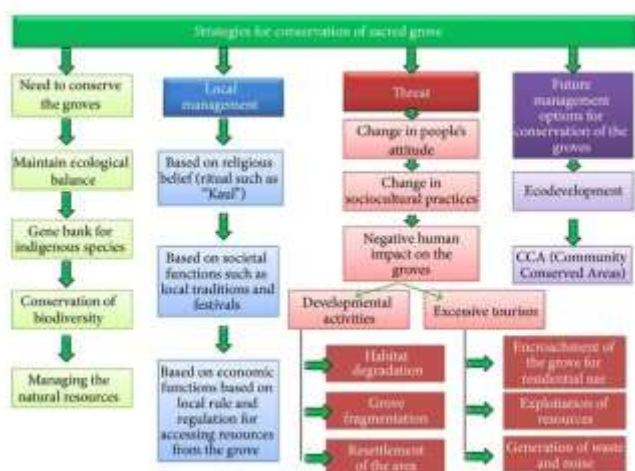


Fig. 2: Strategies for Conservation of Sacred Grove

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Strategies-for-conservation-of-sacred-grove_fig4_287341323

A second, closely related strand of literature has approached sacred groves from a landscape-ecology perspective, asking how these scattered, often small forest fragments contribute to conservation at a broader spatial scale. Bhagwat, Kushalappa, Williams, and Brown, in a 2005 study published in



Conservation Biology, applied a landscape approach to sacred groves in the Western Ghats and found that, despite their typically small individual size, sacred groves collectively contributed meaningfully to regional biodiversity conservation by supplementing the formal protected area network and providing habitat connectivity across a human-modified landscape. This landscape-scale argument was further developed by Bhagwat and Rutte in their influential 2006 review in *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, which argued that sacred groves hold particular conservation value because they often protect habitat types and successional stages that are poorly represented within formally protected areas, and

because their embeddedness within agricultural landscapes allows them to function as stepping stones or refugia that support wider ecological processes such as pollination and seed dispersal. This literature collectively established that the conservation significance of sacred groves extends beyond the biodiversity contained within any single grove to their cumulative role within the broader landscape mosaic.

A third strand of research has focused on the social and institutional dimensions of sacred grove protection, recognising that ecological outcomes cannot be separated from the belief systems and governance structures that produce them. Ormsby and Bhagwat, in a 2010 review published in *Environmental Conservation*, examined sacred forests in the Western Ghats and Meghalaya and found that in most cases community members remained aware of and actively involved in the protection of these fragments, with local taboos restricting activities such as logging, hunting, and the removal of forest products, even where such restrictions were not backed by formal legal sanction. Their analysis also noted, however, that current pressures on these forests were numerous, ranging from demand for timber and other forest products to broader social

and economic change, and that the persistence of sacred groves could not be assumed to continue indefinitely under existing informal governance alone. This concern was developed further in Ormsby's 2011 study in *Human Ecology*, which examined the impacts of global and national conservation policy on the management of Indian sacred groves and argued that inconsistent and often absent legal recognition of sacred groves, combined with the erosion of the customary institutions that traditionally enforced protection, left many groves vulnerable despite their demonstrated ecological value, calling for policy frameworks that would formally recognise and support, rather than displace, community-based management.

Taken together, this body of literature indicates broad scientific consensus that sacred groves possess genuine and measurable biodiversity value, both at the level of individual sites and at the landscape scale, and that this value has historically been sustained through religious belief and customary governance rather than formal legal protection. At the same time, the literature increasingly emphasises that this conservation mechanism is not self-sustaining indefinitely: as the social, religious, and economic conditions that gave rise to sacred grove taboos change, the informal institutions that have protected these forests for generations face growing pressure, a theme that has become increasingly central to sacred grove research over the past two decades.

Objectives of the Study

This study is guided by the following objectives:

To review the documented ecological and biodiversity value of sacred groves, both at the individual site level and within the broader conservation landscape.





To examine the cultural, religious, and institutional mechanisms through which communities have historically protected sacred groves.

To assess the role of sacred groves within, and alongside, India's formal protected area network.

To identify the principal threats and policy gaps currently affecting the persistence of sacred groves.

To propose recommendations for integrating sacred grove conservation more effectively into broader biodiversity policy.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive research design based on a review of secondary, peer-reviewed literature. Sources were identified through structured searches of Google Scholar and academic repositories, using combinations of the terms "sacred groves," "biodiversity conservation," "India," "community-based natural resource management," and "Western Ghats." Sources were included where they were published in a peer-reviewed academic journal, presented original ecological, floristic, or social-science research or a substantive literature synthesis on sacred groves, and were verifiable through an accessible publication record, journal citation, or digital object identifier. Sources that could not be independently verified were excluded from the review.

The review synthesises findings thematically across ecological, institutional, and policy dimensions rather than conducting a new statistical meta-analysis, given the wide variation in geographic scope and methodology, from single-site floristic inventories to landscape-scale conservation biology studies to social-science interview research, across the source literature.

As a literature-based study, this paper does not involve new primary fieldwork or data collection, and its conclusions are therefore descriptive and synthetic, intended to summarise the current state of scientific evidence on sacred groves and biodiversity conservation rather than to generate new empirical findings.

Ecological Significance of Sacred Groves

Species Richness and Refugia Function

A consistent finding across the sacred grove literature is that these community-protected forest patches frequently harbour higher species richness, and a greater representation of rare or endemic species, than surrounding disturbed land. The overview by Khan, Khumbongmayum, and Tripathi synthesised evidence from across India's major sacred grove regions and concluded that these forests function as important refuges for species that have become increasingly rare in the wider landscape, including numerous plants of ethnobotanical and medicinal significance. This pattern has been reinforced by site-specific floristic surveys, such as research documenting substantial vascular plant diversity in the sacred groves of the Jaintia Hills, and by comparative research demonstrating that informally managed sacred groves in the Western Ghats supported higher medicinal plant richness and regeneration than nearby state-managed reserve forests, a finding that underscores the ecological effectiveness of community-based protection even in the absence of formal statutory management.

Ecosystem Services and Landscape Connectivity

Beyond their direct biodiversity value, sacred groves have been shown to contribute a range of ecosystem services and to play a functional role within the broader conservation landscape.





The landscape-scale study by Bhagwat, Kushalappa, Williams, and Brown in the Western Ghats found that sacred groves, despite their often modest individual size, made a meaningful cumulative contribution to regional biodiversity conservation, complementing the formal protected area network rather than duplicating it. Bhagwat and Rutte's synthesis further argued that sacred groves are particularly valuable because they frequently protect habitat types, and stages of forest succession, that are underrepresented within India's formally designated protected areas, meaning that their conservation contribution is not simply additive but qualitatively distinct from that of large state-managed reserves. Because many sacred groves are embedded within agricultural and settled landscapes, they have also been described as functioning as ecological stepping stones that support pollination, seed dispersal, and other landscape-level ecological processes that would otherwise be disrupted by habitat fragmentation.

Cultural and Institutional Basis of Sacred Grove Conservation

Religious Belief and Taboo as Conservation Mechanisms

The protective mechanism underlying sacred groves is fundamentally religious and cultural rather than regulatory. Communities associate individual groves with a resident deity, ancestral spirit, or sacred narrative, and this association generates taboos restricting activities such as logging, hunting, and the removal of forest products, taboos that are enforced through social sanction rather than formal law. The early documentation by Gadgil and Vartak established this belief-based mechanism as the defining feature of sacred groves, distinguishing them from other forms of forest protection, and subsequent research has confirmed that in many communities these taboos remain genuinely effective, with residents in

Ormsby and Bhagwat's study of the Western Ghats and Meghalaya reporting continued awareness of, and adherence to, restrictions on resource use within their local sacred groves.

Community Governance and Customary Institutions

Alongside religious taboo, sacred groves are typically sustained by customary community governance structures, which determine matters such as who may enter a grove, under what circumstances resources may be used, and how violations of grove-related norms are addressed. This customary governance operates independently of, and in most cases predates, the formal Indian forest administration system, and represents a form of common property resource management sustained through generations of local practice rather than through state intervention. Ormsby's 2011 analysis emphasised that this institutional foundation is precisely what makes sacred groves distinctive as a conservation mechanism: their persistence depends not on external enforcement but on the continued social legitimacy of the customary rules and religious beliefs that communities themselves uphold, a feature that gives sacred grove conservation both its historical resilience and its contemporary vulnerability.

Threats and Policy Challenges

Erosion of Traditional Practices

Because sacred grove protection rests on social and religious legitimacy rather than statutory enforcement, it is directly vulnerable to the broader social, economic, and religious changes reshaping rural India. Ormsby and Bhagwat's review noted that sacred forests face mounting pressure from demand for timber and other forest products, alongside wider processes of social and economic transformation that can weaken the





authority of the customary institutions and belief systems that traditionally enforced protection. As younger generations migrate to urban areas, engage with different religious or economic value systems, or become less directly dependent on local forest resources, the intergenerational transmission of the taboos and customary rules that sustain sacred groves can weaken, leaving groves more exposed to encroachment, resource extraction, or conversion even where the underlying religious association with a site persists nominally.

Gaps in Legal Recognition

A second major challenge concerns the inconsistent and often absent legal status of sacred groves within India's formal conservation and land-use policy framework. Ormsby's 2011 study of the impacts of global and national policy on Indian sacred groves found that these community-protected forests generally lack the kind of formal legal recognition and institutional support extended to statutorily protected areas, leaving their long-term security dependent almost entirely on the continued strength of local custom. This gap creates a structural vulnerability: because sacred groves typically fall outside the boundaries of national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, or reserved forests, they can be more easily encroached upon, converted, or degraded during periods of land-use change, infrastructure development, or administrative reorganisation, even when their ecological value, as documented in the biodiversity literature, is comparable to or greater than that of formally protected sites.

Discussion

The evidence reviewed in this paper indicates that sacred groves represent a genuinely significant, and in some respects distinctive, contribution to biodiversity conservation in India,

one grounded not in statutory protection but in sustained religious belief and customary community governance. Ecological studies consistently show that sacred groves support elevated species richness, including rare and medicinally important plants, and that at a landscape scale they complement the formal protected area network by conserving habitat types and providing connectivity that state-managed reserves alone do not capture. At the same time, the literature is equally consistent in identifying the central vulnerability of this conservation model: because sacred groves are protected through social and religious legitimacy rather than legal enforcement, their persistence is directly exposed to the erosion of the belief systems, customary institutions, and intergenerational knowledge transmission that originally created and sustained them.

This creates a distinctive policy challenge that differs from the challenges facing formally protected areas. Whereas state-managed reserves face threats primarily related to enforcement capacity, funding, and encroachment pressure, sacred groves face the additional risk that the very institution of protection, community belief and customary governance, may weaken or disappear even in the absence of any direct external threat to the land itself. The comparative finding that informally managed sacred groves outperformed state-managed reserve forests in medicinal plant richness and regeneration further suggests that formal legal protection is not, on its own, either necessary or sufficient for effective conservation, and that policy responses which simply attempt to convert sacred groves into conventional protected areas risk undermining the very community ownership and customary authority that has made them effective in the first place. This suggests that the most promising policy direction lies not in replacing customary governance with state control, but in finding ways to formally





recognise, legally support, and where necessary revitalise community-based sacred grove management, an approach consistent with the recommendations emerging from the policy-focused literature reviewed above.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence reviewed, the following recommendations are proposed for conservation policymakers, forest departments, and researchers working on sacred grove conservation in India.

State and central conservation policy should extend formal legal recognition to sacred groves, through mechanisms such as community reserve or biodiversity heritage site designations under existing Indian environmental law, without displacing the customary community institutions that currently manage them.

Forest departments and conservation organisations should support, rather than substitute for, existing community governance structures, providing technical and financial assistance for grove documentation, boundary demarcation, and ecological monitoring while leaving management authority with local custodial communities.

Efforts should be made to document and support the intergenerational transmission of the cultural knowledge and customary rules associated with sacred groves, given that the erosion of this knowledge base, rather than direct physical destruction, represents one of the most significant long-term threats identified in the literature.

Sacred groves should be systematically incorporated into landscape-scale biodiversity planning and protected area network design, given evidence that they often protect habitat

types and provide ecological connectivity not captured by existing formally protected areas.

Future research should prioritise longitudinal studies tracking how sacred grove condition and community governance strength change over time, in order to better identify which groves are most at risk of losing effective protection and where policy intervention would be most valuable.

Conclusion

Sacred groves occupy a distinctive place in the landscape of global biodiversity conservation, sustained not by statutory protection but by religious belief, cultural memory, and customary community governance that in many cases predates the modern Indian forest administration system by generations. The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that these community-protected forests deliver genuine and measurable conservation value, supporting elevated species richness, safeguarding rare and medicinally significant plants, and contributing to landscape-level ecological connectivity in ways that complement, and in some respects exceed, the contribution of formally protected areas. At the same time, this conservation model carries an inherent vulnerability: because it depends on the continued vitality of the social and religious institutions that created it, sacred grove protection is directly exposed to the broader forces of social, economic, and cultural change reshaping rural India, and cannot be assumed to persist automatically simply because a grove has survived intact for generations. Securing the future of sacred groves as a meaningful component of India's biodiversity conservation strategy will require conservation policy that recognises and legally supports customary community governance.

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