Sacred Groves in India: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

Sacred groves—forest patches protected through Indigenous belief systems and ritual practices—have played a pivotal role in India's ecological stewardship for centuries. This paper presents a qualitative review of scholarly literature on sacred groves across India, integrating historical and sociocultural perspectives. Through content analysis, the study highlights the evolution of sacred groves from Vedic textual references to present-day Indigenous and community governance frameworks. Key findings relate to Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), caste and gender roles in ritual ecology, and the legal invisibility of sacred groves under colonial and postcolonial forest policies. Regional documentation, from Kerala's Kavu and Odisha's Sarna forests to West Bengal's community-managed patches, illustrates the embeddedness of TEK within ritual landscapes. The analysis reveals a growing but still niche research domain, with themes centred on religion, biodiversity, forest policy, and cultural identity. The regional focus remains concentrated in southern and eastern India, while significant gaps persist in pan-Indian documentation and policy integration. The paper argues for recognising sacred groves as Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) and embedding them within national and global conservation frameworks. The conclusion reflects on the global relevance of India's sacred groves and outlines pathways for future interdisciplinary inquiry.

Keywords: India, Indigenous Conservation, Sacred Forests, Traditional Ecological Knowledge

1. Introduction

The Indian worldview is fundamentally biocentric, perceiving nature as sacred and sentient. Sanskrit texts such as the Aranyakas (forest texts), the Upanishads, and the Smritis contain numerous descriptions of the uses and management of forests [1]. Many of these sacred landscapes embody the continuity between Traditional Ecological Knowledge and contemporary conservation practices [2, 3]. One enduring traditional conservation practice is the maintenance of sacred groves. Sacred groves are culturally protected forest fragments and socio-ecological landscapes preserved through religious beliefs and traditional governance across India [4]. These groves, often associated with local deities, spiritual taboos, and seasonal rituals, predate formal environmental legislation and embody Indigenous frameworks of biodiversity

conservation [5, 6]. They exist as living cultural repositories, preserving not only ecological knowledge but also oral histories, caste-based roles, and gendered custodianship [7, 8].

The significance of sacred groves lies in their ability to integrate spiritual reverence with ecological function [9]. As biocultural landscapes, they serve multiple roles: protecting endemic flora and fauna, sustaining water sources, and fostering socio-religious cohesion [6]. However, these traditional systems have received uneven attention in modern environmental policy and academic discourse. While some states have documented sacred groves through ethnobotanical or ecological surveys, others lack formal recognition or protective mechanisms [4, 10, 11].

Despite the growing body of literature on sacred groves, existing research remains fragmented across disciplinary, regional, and methodological boundaries [4, 10, 12]. There is also a notable regional imbalance, with a concentration of empirical work in southern and eastern India, leaving northern and northeastern regions underrepresented [9, 10]. Furthermore, while theoretical contributions from cultural ecology and commons theory have been applied to specific case studies, there is a lack of integrative analyses that connect Indigenous belief systems, governance structures, and environmental policy frameworks. This paper examines sacred groves through the lenses of history and social science, employing qualitative methods to identify emerging themes, regional trends, and policy gaps.

2. Methodology

This review paper employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in content analysis to explore the historical and socio-cultural dimensions of sacred grove research in India. The study follows a two-tiered approach: (1) the systematic retrieval and selection of relevant literature that utilises ethnographic fieldwork, historical textual analysis, participatory observation, visual ethnography, semi-structured interviews, policy content analysis, and archival documents, and (2) the qualitative content analysis of the selected documents.

The literature for this review was retrieved from the Scopus database. A targeted search was conducted using the search string *(sacred OR holy) AND (grove* OR forest*) India**. This search was restricted to two subject areas to ensure relevance to the research objective: Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities. Each document was then subjected to a relevance screening based on thematic focus on sacred groves and sacred forests, direct or indirect treatment of socio-cultural, historical, or governance-related aspects, and geographic relevance to India. These documents comprise the core dataset for the in-depth content analysis presented in this review.

3. Results

The content analysis revealed six major themes that together capture the scholarly discourse on sacred groves: (1) Ritual Ecology, (2) Biocultural Conservation, (3) Governance of Sacred Groves as Cultural Commons, (4) Forest Policy and Legal Pluralism, (5) Gender and Ecology, and (6) Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). These themes illustrate how sacred groves are

understood in diverse yet interconnected ways. They reflect the broader theoretical orientations of cultural ecology, heritage, political ecology, and sustainability.

3.1 Ritual Ecology

The theme of ritual ecology has emerged as a foundational lens. Sacred groves are increasingly understood not merely as religious spaces, but as ecological entities whose protection is governed through spiritual injunctions, taboos, and ritual cycles. Studies across Kerala, Odisha, and Maharashtra have documented how festivals, seasonal worship, and deity-based prohibitions regulate access to natural resources, functioning as informal yet effective conservation practices [4-6]. This ritual-environmental interface has gained traction within political ecology and environmental anthropology, establishing sacred groves as sites of spiritual environmentalism [11, 13].

3.2 Biocultural Conservation

The notion of biocultural conservation has been pivotal in shaping contemporary discourse [9, 14]. Sacred groves are regarded as living repositories where biodiversity coexists with oral traditions, cultural identities, and social memories [10, 13]. Researchers have highlighted how groves sustain endemic flora, particularly medicinal plants, while also preserving intangible heritage: songs, myths, ritual knowledge, and gendered practices [1, 15]. This intersection of ecological and cultural values aligns sacred groves with broader international frameworks such as UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention [16].

3.3 Governance of Sacred Groves as Cultural Commons

A major theme involves the governance of sacred groves as cultural commons. Scholars have explored how grove stewardship is managed through customary institutions, such as temple trusts, clan councils, or caste-based custodianship systems. These decentralised arrangements often function without state support but are underpinned by collective norms and social sanctions [6, 17]. The application of commons theory has brought renewed attention to the resilience of informal governance mechanisms, particularly in regions dominated by tribal populations, such as Jharkhand and Odisha [4, 8, 18].

3.4 Forest Policy and Legal Pluralism

Another significant domain of inquiry is forest policy and legal pluralism. Sacred groves, being neither entirely religious institutions nor formal protected areas, exist within a grey zone of Indian environmental law [11, 13] Historical analysis reveals their exclusion from colonial forest legislations (1865–1927), which prioritised revenue and state control. In the postcolonial context, although policies such as the Forest Rights Act (2006) and the Biological Diversity Act (2002) make indirect references to community-conserved areas, sacred groves are rarely accorded explicit legal status [13]. This raises concerns about their vulnerability to land conversion, ritual commodification, and ecological degradation. The need for legal frameworks

that acknowledge and empower traditional custodianship is a recurring argument across the reviewed literature [11, 13]

The theme of gender and ecology has gained increasing prominence. Sacred groves, particularly in regions such as West Bengal and Kerala, often involve women as key knowledge holders and ritual performers. Women's roles in medicinal plant conservation, seasonal rituals, and spiritual healing practices underscore the gendered dimensions of ecological stewardship. Despite this, few policies or scholarly works have foregrounded women's agency in grove governance, highlighting the need for feminist perspectives within sacred ecology research [9, 10].

3.6 Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)

TEK associated with sacred groves encompasses the identification and classification of medicinal species, seasonal and ritual calendars aligned with ecological rhythms, mythological frameworks linked to flora and fauna, taboos against overexploitation, and structural modification [1, 9].

Studies from the Western Ghats and Eastern Ghats indicate that groves preserve biodiversity indices comparable to those of protected areas (Chandrashekara et al., 2002; Dudley et al., 2009a; Rath & Ormsby, 2020) This underscores their potential as low-cost, community-driven conservation tools rooted in ecological intelligence and cultural symbolism [6].

4. Discussion

In terms of regional research trends, the bibliometric and qualitative review indicates that southern and eastern states have received disproportionate scholarly attention. Kerala and Maharashtra feature prominently due to extensive ecological and ethnographic documentation. Odisha, Jharkhand, Karnataka and West Bengal have contributed valuable insights into tribal and biocultural aspects, with research focusing on Indigenous governance, seed rituals, and seasonal festivals. However, northern and northeastern India remain conspicuously underrepresented in both academic literature and policy discourse. This regional imbalance risks reinforcing partial narratives and highlights the need for pan-Indian documentation initiatives.

The field is also characterised by several critical research gaps. Foremost among them is the absence of a national inventory or digital registry of sacred groves. While isolated mapping projects exist at the state or NGO level, there is no centralised, accessible platform for researchers, policymakers, or communities. Such a registry would be vital for recognising grove diversity, monitoring ecological change, and safeguarding customary rights.

Moreover, there is a lack of interdisciplinary research that bridges the fields of history, ecology, cultural studies, and indigenous knowledge systems. Most existing work remains isolated within specific disciplinary frameworks, limiting its policy impact and cross-sectoral relevance. Future research must adopt integrative methodologies that can address the full complexity of sacred groves as socio-ecological systems.

Another major gap is the dearth of longitudinal studies tracking the transformation or degradation of groves over time. Given accelerating urbanisation, ritual modification, and land pressure, it is crucial to understand how sacred groves adapt or decline in different socio-political contexts. Such studies would also help in assessing the efficacy of conservation interventions.

Finally, there is a lack of integration of Indian sacred groves into the global conservation discourse, particularly within the framework of Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) [19]. Despite sharing features with globally recognised sacred natural sites in Africa, Japan, and Latin America, India's groves have received limited international attention or support [20]. Strengthening global collaborations and comparative analyses could enhance recognition and funding, while also situating sacred groves within a planetary ethics of conservation.

5. Conclusion

Sacred groves in India embody the convergence of ecological resilience, spiritual cosmology, and Indigenous governance. Functioning as community-managed forest enclaves, they present an enduring model of conservation that integrates biodiversity protection with ritual practice, customary law, and cultural memory. These biocultural landscapes challenge the binaries of nature and culture or science and spirituality, offering a holistic paradigm of ecological ethics.

In the context of climate change and biodiversity decline, sacred groves demonstrate sustainable, low-cost, and community-driven conservation strategies rooted in trust, kinship, and reverence. Their persistence highlights the adaptive strength of traditional ecological knowledge even without formal legal protection.

Globally, India's sacred groves stand out for their scale, diversity, and plural religious foundations, aligning with the framework of Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs). Future research should prioritise national documentation, inclusive governance, and comparative global analyses to strengthen their policy and heritage recognition. Ultimately, sacred groves represent dynamic living systems where nature and culture coevolve, offering vital insights for ethical and sustainable environmental governance in the twenty-first century.

6. References

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