

Sacred Groves of Rajasthan through Folkloric Beliefs: An Overview

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Abstract

Sacred groves or sacred woods are groves of trees, related to traditional, religious & cultural beliefs & these areas are dedicated to local deity & ancestor spirits. They can be found as a section of a forest. They are excellent illustrations of in-situ conservation. These groves, which are around the nation in villages & cities, plains and mountain areas, represent a priceless genetic diversity which helps to preserve our environment in many ways. Many extinct species that could have perished otherwise have been saved because of these virgin forest regions. Besides protecting biological diversity, the entire ecosystem aids in water & soil conservation. In case of Rajasthan, sacred woods can be considered as one of the preservers of priceless ancient religious practices & traditional beliefs. Therefore, sacred forests offer humanity certain crucial ecological functions. In the recent times, drastic changes around the globe have also impacted both religious practices and biological integrity. The destruction of the historic heritage has several causes, some of which need to be investigated, including changes in social beliefs, modernity, and the eroding of cultural practices. It becomes important to spread the awareness of management and conservation of various ecosystem services as well as to suggest management and conservation as an alternative strategy for the sustainability of forestry around human settlements.

Keywords: Sacred groves, Beliefs and Customs, Biodiversity, Ecosystem services, Folkloric beliefs.

1. INTRODUCTION

The people of Rajasthan have a strong tradition of worshiping nature as a form of conservation from the very early days. A portion of the forest close to the settlement is conserved because they believe that local deities and ancestors live there. Not only forests but also grasslands and water bodies are considered as sacred areas. Because of this belief, they are revered and any damaging activity is forbidden in sacred forest. People believe that these places are the home of God and Goddesses, so they preserve and worship these places. These places are related to temples, monasteries and other pilgrim sites. 'Sacred forest' is the term given to these kinds of woodlands. In Rajasthan, these holy places are referred by a variety of names, including *Deora*, *Malvan*, *Deorai*, *Rakhat Bani*, *Oran*, etc. Sacred groves are among the most studied topics, even though there aren't many studies on them.

Dietrich Brandis first provided information on the sacred groves of the Aravallis in 1887. Though there have been very few publications on sacred trees, he stated that this did not imply that there are not many

of these places in India. He noted that Pratapgarh and Banswara are home to many of Rajasthan's sacred groves, particularly those in the Rajputana and Mewar regions. 'Anogeissus pendula' trees are very common in this area. No one ever cut woods from these forests areas for their own benefits. Only dead and fallen trees are cut down for religious purposes like funerals and temple repairs. In 1995, Joshi offered intriguing insights into tribal practices of sustaining holy woods in his writing on the Ethnobotany of Rajasthan. They investigated the sacred groves in the southern Aravallis Between January 1991 and August 1994. In addition to different indigenous resource management traditions, data based on social, ecological, social, economical and religious factors was gathered. In the framework of the sacred, the available resources, biodiversity, societal beliefs, risks and factors contributing to biodiversity loss, the economic position of village residents, proposals for conserving sacred groves, and shared forest management were examined. A report on the sacred trees in the Rajasthani districts of Ajmer and Udaipur was issued by AFC in 1997. Singh and Saxena (1998) and Jha et al. (1998) recently completed two case studies of sacred groves in western Rajasthan.

According to Professor Madhav Gadgil and Vartak, two Indian academics researching the history of sacred woods, the idea of virgin forests first entered human consciousness between the years 3000-5000 BC, when people relied on hunting and foraging for food in forests. The man had not yet mastered agriculture at this time. Humans probably cleared forests to establish farming on empty ground. At that time, they had consecrated a tiny portion of the forest to their local gods and ancestors. These forests were typically found near watersheds, where they had year-round access to water. As a result, they understood and believed that the gods and goddesses who reside in these forests have made water available to them as a favor.

In reality, these sacred woodlands are incredibly diverse. These locations are important from a social and religious perspective. Residents in the area, nomadic tribes, wild males, and tribal peoples all guard them. They hold the concept that deities live in these locations and that frequently; Hindu deity idols are correctly installed in these sacred woodlands. The sacred forests hold a special place in the hearts of the locals. According to popular belief, any form of tree chopping down or harm to the plants cultivated in these areas makes the Gods and Goddesses furious. Natural catastrophes like floods, storms, droughts, etc. consequently start. Furthermore, numerous illnesses begin to spread, destroying crops. Because of this, some sacred forests do not even touch their fruits or fallen, dried leaves.

2. THE STATUS OF SCARED GROVES AROUND INDIA

In various regions of the nation, the sacred groves are referred to by various names. Around 13,270 groves have reportedly been reported from all around the nation, according to Malhotra (1998). Some of the major regions where the survey is performed, such as Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, , Mizoram, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, Nagaland, Odisha and Himachal Pradesh, have yet to disclose the true picture of sacred woods.

The gradual loss of cultural and traditional values within the neighboring communities, which have thus negatively impacted the maintenance of these sacred groves, is a serious cause of concern. The preservation of the groves has been hampered by modernization, education, and the local people's rising skepticism of traditional value systems. The area of the groves has been reduced by the new demands of expanding industrialization & urbanization, road constructions, houses and many other infrastructures. The fact that ecologically concerned communities and civil society have taken up this subject seriously and are reversing the trend, however, is encouraging.

Sacred groves can be found notably in the Khashi and Jayantia hills in Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, and Sikkim of the northeastern part of India. These sacred trees are mainly connected to monasteries, holy locations, and spiritual destinations in these states. They are also found in Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and Puducherry in the southern region of India. And in Western India, Rajasthan and Gujrat are major preservers for protecting the sacred woodland. The northern part of India includes Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand for protecting the sacred groves, and Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal for protecting the sacred groves in the eastern section of India. Apart from these, Goa, Chattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh come under the major preserver states of sacred groves in India.. Some of the scared groves of various states are discussed in detail below-

In Andhra Pradesh, sacred groves are decaying at a startling rate as a result of shifting religious perspectives and development pressures. By eliminating the greenery, several temples connected to sacred woods have undergone modernization. Black Plum, Tamarind, Mango, Jackfruit, Neem, Beechwood, and Pipal are a few of the species frequently seen in the sacred woods of Andhra Pradesh. The Gompa Forest Areas (GFAs) is a small group of sacred trees in Arunachal Pradesh that is cared by Lamas and the people of Mompma tribe. This area is located with a Buddhist Monastery. There are now 65 known sacred groves. To native deities like Ubro or Ubram and Thouw-gew, these sacred trees are devoted. Because of their traditional beliefs, various ethnic groups in Northeast India have maintained and safeguarded numerous forest sections and even specific trees or animals from the very early days. The West Kameng and Tawang of Arunachal Pradesh have several monasteries with sacred gardens.

The Bodo and Rabha tribes live in the foothills and plains of Western Assam and are forest-dwelling, have a practice of maintaining holy forests known as "Than" in the local language. The sacred groves are referred as '*Madaico*' by the Dimasa tribes of the North Cachar hills in the Haflong district of Assam. The state of Assam is home to many Vaishnav temples, such as the 'Shankara Deva Mathas', which also contain sacred trees. The identity of a region or village is frequently linked to the availability or significance of plant resources to the local populace. Deer hunting is prohibited during the mating season in the groves, and birds are also protected during the nesting season (Medhi and Borthakur, 2013).

In Chhattisgarh, the holy groves are known as *Devgudi*, *Matagudi* and *Gaondevi* (Malhotra, Chatterjee, Srivastava, Gokhale, 2001). In Goa, sacred groves are referred by a variety of names, including Devran, Devrai, Pann etc. The Keri village of Sattari is home to some of Goa's most well-preserved holy forests. In Haryana unlike in many States there is no generic name for SGs although the sites are protected for similar reasons(Malhotra, Chatterjee, Srivastava, Gokhale, 2001). Information on the number of sacred woods is lacking. Some of the gods to whom these sacred trees are devoted are Jairamdas, Khetanath, Shiv, Bala, Nao Gaja, Sundari and Mani Goga Peer. White pear, Mandarin, Bruisewort, garden violet, lac tree, elm, pipal, banyan, and the flame of the forest are some of the common plants that can be found in these sacred woods. These groves serve as a storage area for medications as well as a source of food that includes honey, fruits, and water (Yadav,2010). In Himachal Pradesh, the indigenous myths and stories on sacred groves play a significant role in protecting the forests from exploitation. There are several groves named '*Dev Ka Jungle*' or '*Devta Van*' that are devoted to a local deity. It is forbidden to cut down trees or even carry dry leaves outside the region. People also have belief that if they cut the trees or take anything from the forest the local deity might destroy them and their families.

Jharkhand's indigenous people revere their sarnas, or sacred groves. A sarna is a group of trees where the adivasis would perform various acts of worship. Several species are frequently found in sacred groves, including Indian black plum, Indian plum, white marudah, tulasi, Indian gooseberry, neem,

mango, Malabar nut, thorn apple, sal, and champak. In Odisha, the institution of holy groves is known by many names, including 'Jahera' and 'Thakurnama'. According to Malhotra et al. (2011), the area is home to a wide variety of medicinal plants, roots, fruit trees, shrubs, and creepers (like siari). It also supports a wide variety of resident birds, reptiles, and wild animals.

In Rajasthan, there are several different names for sacred groves. In Mewar these groves are known as Vani, in Ajmer it is known as Kenkri, Oran in Jodhpur, Bikaner, and Jaisalmer. In Alwar, sacred forests are known as Devbani. There are about 560 sacred groves known to exist in Rajasthan. These woods are devoted to the Gods, Goddesses & local deities. Cutch Tree, Indian Mesquite, Mukul Myrrh Tree, Salvia Leaved Cross Berry, Indian Tree Of Paradise, Neem, Indian Plum, Banyan, and Pipal are some of the plant species found in the Groves of Rajasthan. An excellent illustration of how to support a tradition's reliance on ecosystem services is the custom in Rajasthan. When necessary or only in an emergency, the groves' resources are exploited. Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) is planted and revered as the home of God Devnarayan by the Gurjar people of Rajasthan, which is distinctive practice (Aman Singh, 2014).

3. SCARED GROVES OF RAJASTHAN

According to Prasad R. and Rathore D. Kr. Prasad (Prasad.2021), the sacred groves of Rajasthan are also known by other names such as Oran, Jogmaya, Deora, and Thanak. The highest number of sacred forests in the state is being preserved in the Aravalli mountain range. The trees that are revered in Rajasthan are Rudraksha, Bel, Ashok, Kadam, Pipal, Kalpavriksha, and Khezri. The biggest example in Rajasthan is the worship of two venerated trees that are over 800 years old. These trees include the Hindu mythological "Kalpavriksha" (*Adansonia digitata*), which is located in Mangaliyawas near Ajmer, Rajasthan, on an Amavashya (new moon night) day during the Hindu month of Shravan. (Singh G.2014).

In the Aravallis and Vindhya, there are three main categories of sacred groves. We categorize groves close to a water source and close to a village in the first group. These groves are also found on small hills in the Aravallis, where people worship devotees of Bawsi, Mataji and Bheruji. In Udaipur, people worship Kukawas Bheruji, Khanpa Bheruji, Badi Roopan Mata among others. Such groves are numerous in the 'Vindhyan' region of Kota, Bundi, Jhalawar, and Bundi. People also worship and show respect to Lord Shiv in these groves. Groves are frequently used to protect the entire watershed's vegetation. A watershed's vegetation may occasionally have a portion that is protected. The essential features of these groves are a water supply and big trees. At Kamalnath, Ubeshwarji, Taneshwarji, Gautmeshwasji and Jhameshwarji, water sources are constructed open and step wells (Bawdi) may be seen. Additionally, two clans occasionally coexist in the same village. A single tree may be the third type. There are several huge *Ficus benghalensis* trees in the Kotra forest range. One tree resembles a grove because of their growth of aerial roots. A single tree looks like a forest. Not just in Rajasthan but also in other Indian states is the custom of guarding Peepal, Gular, and Bargad trees. Other Asian and African nations are also said to practice the custom.

Numerous types of sacred groves are kept in the Aravallis' northern regions. They are referred to by the names kankar bani, rakhat bani, dev ouranya, vall, and devbani. Orans are the forests consist of a large area found in western Rajasthan, mainly in desert region. These Orans are exactly like the sacred groves in the Aravallis, and they provide the same benefits. Ramdeora in the Rajasthan district of Jaisalmer is one of the best instances of Oran. *Prosopis cineraria*, *Zizyphus Mauritiana*, and *Salvadora*. are the dominant species in the majority of the Orans. The majority of Orans in the Jaisalmer District have

Caparris Aphylla, Calotropis Procera and Zizyphus. These species are also used as medicine in many diseases including snakebite. However, compared to other sacred groves, those in the Aravallis and Vindhya encompass more ground.

In the semi-arid district of Sirohi in Rajasthan, notable Orans include Voreshwar Mahadeo in Sheoganj, Pichheshwar Mahadeo near Pindwara, Sarneshwar Mahadeo nearby (famous for well with steps), Mochal Mataji in Sheoganj (famous for various animal species like Neelgai & Chinkara), Baleshwari Mataji Oran in Pesua village (famous for Rayan tree).

4. BIODIVERSITY AND ITS ASSETS

Sacred groves have an exceptionally rich floral richness. Sacred groves contain multiple-use livelihood items in addition to a variety of non-timber forest products. In sacred groves, it is customary to gather fodder (dried hay or straw), fruits, dried fallen leaves & wood, seeds and ethno medicine from different plant species. Sacred trees stand as a major source of water in traditional irrigation systems in Aravalli's. Additionally, these habitats offer mammals and birds refuge, water, and places to build nests. Several types of honeybees build their nests in tall trees in holy groves. Honey helps save bees from going extinct in the area while also generating income for those who collect and sell it. As a result, local employment in the honey industry depends on the Peepal, Bargad, and Gular trees. In sacred forests, significant trees like Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) thrive. Neem is a significant tree in ethnobotany. The locals receive carbohydrates from dry fruits like Khajjura (Dates) trees. Additionally, it provides help to grow local employment through the gathering and sale of leaves which are used to make brooms.

Some significant fruit-bat roosting locations can be found in the Khajjura groves close to Deola and Zhed. In these trees, some cavity-nesting birds excavate their nests. Large trees in Aravallis forests are getting harder to find. Birds that benefit farmers by consuming insect pests use the trees in groves as nesting and roosting locations. According to one study, the sacred forests of the Aravallis are home to different species of parakeets, several species of owls, kingfisher, woodpeckers, barbets, mynas of tits, all of which use cavities to nest. It provides hoopoe, tree creeper, and one species of roller with nesting locations. Besides these, several additional species are also thought to be able to breed in similar locations, but no convincing evidence was found during the time of the study.

Again, some sacred groves are home to a single species of tree. Examples are Malpur, Rama Rathore, Valiakheda, and Dhaikhera, which are home to teak trees (*Tectona grandis*), and Zed and Devla Groves, which are home to Khajjura trees. In Vindhya, sacred groves are primarily made up of Dhok and Khakhra on the rolling hills and plains. However, Arjun tree and Jamun tree dominate sacred woods along water streams. On the peripheral sides of Kota, Karneshwar Sacred is one of the best specimens of a grove that is situated beside a creek. It supports numerous additional animal species in addition to at least 53 different bird species. It features a pool of water where various fish species, waterfowl, and waders live. Different species such as *Terminalia arjuna*, *Syzygium cumini*, *Mangifera indica*, *Ficus benghalensis*, *Ficus glomerata*, etc are found in this grove.

The Jhalawar city's Jharan Mahadeo sacred grove is located next to a stream that flows into a sizable tank, ensuring a year-round supply of water for the city. In the entire area, this is the sole green space. It is crucial because it safeguards a watershed that, in the absence of vegetation, would likely silt up very quickly. Among the rare plants are *Sclerachra oleosa* and *Bambusa hamiltonii*. The fact that it is a de facto sanctuary for endangered plants, all of them have vanished from the surrounding area outside the grove, makes it significant as well. The Jharan Sacred Grove serves as a marker and standard for any

previous forests that might have existed in the area. Today, it serves as a gene bank, a habitat island, a natural laboratory, and a repository for traditional medicine. A water spring that never runs dry exists. In the groves, the Forest Department has been operating a forest nursery for the past 50 years to produce and distribute seedlings for plantations. This guarantees that the grove will continue to exist in its current state.

5. GOVERNANCE AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

People tend to avoid damaging sacred trees due to socio-religious customs and a generalized dread of the unknown; they think that if they cut down the trees or touch them with an axe, the presiding deity would harm them and their family members. In the Udaipur village of Madar, there is a tradition regarding the sacred Ekpaniya Bavsi grove. Someone attempted to take down a *Haldu* (*Haldina cordifolia*) tree from the sacred forest. Water and milk both descended from the initial incision. The axeman lost his sight after the third chop, which resulted in blood. His eyesight was restored only after the axeman vowed to build a new temple for *Ekpaniya Bavsi*. These kind of stories have a significant impact on the preservation of sacred groves.

Normally, the fallen and ripe fruits are often taken from the grove. Religious buildings are repaired with wood from mature trees. For religious events like Annakut, a religious communal feast, dead and fallen wood is also used. Funerals also involve the usage of wood. Trees aren't cut down or taken out for other purposes. However, Lord Shrinath ji's temple woodlands in Ghasiar are used to gather wood and other forest products. Some species might be lopped off for feed if there is a severe drought. Such species include *Butea Monosperma*, *Lannea Coromandelica*, *Azadirachta Indica*, *Neem*, *Ber*, *Zizyphus*, *Salar*, *Boswellia Serrata*, *Prosopis Cineraria*, *Acacia Leucophloea*, *Ronjh*, and *Ficus Benghalensis* among others. Close to Udaipur, there is a significant sacred grove. Lord Shiva is the subject of a temple in Ubeshwar Mahadeo. Because of its proximity to a stream; it can be used by both people and animals as a watering and resting spot. According to tradition, no cow dung is taken out of the area and is instead left to rot or dry up, as noted by Kishore Saint (1994). The villagers and pilgrims who go to the temple prepare bati (a native bread that resembles a ball) using dried dung cakes. The arrangement protects the grove's purity and gives everyone access to a plentiful supply of firewood. Besides these, the sacred groves also serve as gathering spaces in villages for the people to arrange meetings, discuss socio-religious, economic, and personal complaints.

In comparison to other traditional forest management methods, temple woods are examined more because of their size and visible locations. To support the temple, temple woodlands are managed and kept in good condition. This could involve social, ecological, economic, and even religious functions. In Rajasthan, many forests are managed to satisfy the needs of temples, which in turn sustain social and religious activities. The Temple Trust owns a sizable temple forest at the '*Shri Nath Ji Temple*' in Rajasthan, as well as a sacred grove that is situated within the Gautameshwar forest block. State forest regulations do not give Temple Trust management authority. Protection from grazing, fire, illegal felling, and fence wall breach is all part of management.

6. CHALLENGES TO THE GROVE SYSTEM

Urbanization, industrialization, over-exploitation of resources, continuous destruction of our environment, air pollution, water pollution, shrinkage and degradation, mining, encroachment and many

other problems bring the threat to the sacred groves. Additionally, adjustments in social structure and resource management have an impact on Grove tradition simultaneously.

Due to the building of a dam over the water stream that runs through the sacred grove of Ubeshwarji in Rajasthan, a portion of it was destroyed by submersion. Stone quarrying and mining pose a threat to the sacred Taneshwarji grove. The sacred forest of Amrakji, which guards a sizable specimen of *Holoptelia Integrifolia* and supplies drinking water to cattle raised by residents of a neighboring village, was threatened by businessmen who wanted to build factories there. Because it includes valuable teakwood, the Malpur Sacred Grove on private property was clear-felled.

The pressure from a growing population and livestock is another factor endangering Orans. Due to the unfortunate fact that these grounds are still to be designated as forest areas, effective law is not used to punish criminals who undermine community values. The problem has gotten worse because younger generations are not trusted.

7. CONSERVATION OF THE SACRED GROVE

The system has recently attracted renewed interest, mostly as a result of its priceless contribution to the preservation of biodiversity and significant ecosystem services. Diverse actions have been conducted by national and international organizations to protect the grove tradition from extinction. Forest departments, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), village committees, professors, and researchers are all actively engaged in grove conservation efforts in India. Three primary categories of conservation activities are discussed below:

1. Boosting or strengthening the villagers' recent conservation efforts

Villagers can safeguard the groves nearby with assistance from the forest department and NGOs. To protect the grove biota and ecological activities, steps can be taken like preventing cattle grazing, restricting manure collection, removing invasive species, completely banning infrastructure construction, etc. Carbon credits, ecotourism and rewards for monitoring different activities with a focus on regional needs and conditions could all be used as incentives.

2. Rebuilding the deteriorated sacred groves

Planting local species, protecting, seedling and sapling, establishing nurseries for rare, endemic plants, and taking efforts to conserve soil and water are just a few examples of restoration operations. These are depending on local community interests and knowledge, benefits to local livelihoods, and effective scientific assessment and monitoring of the conservation actions.

3. Natural-level strategy

The landscape approach is more comprehensive and calls for an in-depth understanding of the ecological processes occurring in the grove system and its surrounds, as well as the interactions of the grove biota and concerns of landscape ecology. An integrated strategy at the landscape level is necessary since ecosystem services including pollination; seed dispersal, nutrient cycling, and soil and water conservation are typically performed in broader spatial extents combining various land use types at various periods. Given the groves' current fragmented state, they can serve as endemic plant repositories, soil seed banks, and a connecting route for birds and other animals in human-dominated settings. As a result, preserving the grove heritage at the natural level demands a comprehensive and integrated approach.

8. CONCLUSION

Groves are a long-standing, conventional method of natural preservation that has been embraced by communities throughout the world. Before the term "conservation" was ever established, perhaps this was the first attempt by the rural population to safeguard nature from overuse. People must be made aware of the necessity for its management and conservation since they will undoubtedly gain from the restoration of sacred groves as ethnomedicinal remedies, dead and fallen wood, seed collecting, and restricted irrigation from the water source nearby.

According to the Rajasthan State Forest Policy (2010), Orans and Devbanis are significant as "islands of good forests where religious faith is linked with conservation and repositories of rich biodiversity." Although these Orans are local lands, the state revenue department is the actual owner. An efficient technique for guaranteeing conservation through community involvement is the customs of safeguarding Orans and appointing the local members as the stewards. A well-thought-out, comprehensive strategy that includes widespread community awareness, local commitment, and favorable policies and legislation is essential.

This paper has mainly focused on the conservative and folkloric significance of Rajasthan's sacred groves. Because the locals regard these woodlands as sacred, they have been kept safe. These old woodlands are crucial for creating oxygen and removing contaminants from the environment. Sacred groves are significantly less common because of contemporary development activities. As a result of increased encroachment and forest exploitation, these woods' continued existence is currently in danger. There is currently a need for regulations to be developed to safeguard these sacred groves. The local government ought to acknowledge these regions. We can save these sacred woodlands with all of these efforts.

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