

# The Fading Idea of Sacred Forests and Sustainability in Northeast India

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## Abstract

Northeast India has been known for its huge forest covers and traditional ways of livelihood from as long as one can remember. States like Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram has records of forest-covered lands of more than eighty percent. This is mainly due to the practice of nature-worship that is prevalent among several tribes of the region. However, in the new era of hyper-developmentalism, such tremendous reports of green cover can be equated with the rarest of gems. Even in famous media and advertisements, the region is showcased in a way of being in harmony with nature unlike many rapidly developing concrete hubs of *mainland* India. However, there has been a steady decline in the *green bliss* of Northeast India over the last three decades. In these decades, there has been clashes of the local people and the central government over several policies that has staggered the daily lives of the people of the region. Scholars from several corners have put forward their own unique assumptions regarding the degrading environmental status of the region. This paper will attempt to investigate into all these factors briefly. Yet, the focus of the paper will be to take a dive into the environmental history of Northeast India and investigate the cultural practices of many Northeastern tribes regarding forests and several such elements of nature as sacred. This sacrality will be attempted to be equated with sustainable development and how this has declined over the years. The paper will also venture into the larger issues at hand and how it has influenced and affected the Northeastern region over the years.

**Keywords:** Northeast India, environment, sacrality, forests, sustainability

## Introduction

In the world dictated by climate change and loss of biodiversity, the authorities in power are attempting to take several desperate steps for its conservation. From conventions to conferences regarding environmental conservation, many arrows have been aimed towards conservation and protection, sometimes in the light but mostly in the dark. It is because even if fancy and appealing conventions are held and papers signed with leaders vouching strongly to protect the environment and the ecosystem, what really matters is bringing it into practice. The world has at the same time witnessed the modern growth of many eco-parks and conservation forests that has tried to protect the environment in general. But such practices were inherent in the culture and tradition of several communities of India and the world.

These cultural practices rooted in spiritualism mostly has been the key of environmental conservation. India being the spiritual homeland of several belief systems, has over 1 million forests that are regarded as sacred. Sacred forests are found all over India. In an interesting case of Uttarakhand, also called the *Dev-bhoomi* (the land of gods) such sacred forests helped reserve several useful species of plants and at the same time helped maintain a clean water system in these forests which has even been regarded as clean

according to WHO's water standards. According to one of the online blog articles, it has been nicely said that *Sacred Groves are the secret wizards of conservation*. (Wadhwa, A. 2023) The Western Ghat, the Himalayan region and the Northeastern region of India all shares the name of being the home of sacred forests of India. [1](#)

Madhav Gadgil in an online article challenges the traditional yet conservationist definition of sacred forests as being protected solely because of people's spiritual and superstitious belief systems. In one instance in the Nilgiri Hills, the author accounted how a certain group of people harvested honey by putting fire on the bee hives. This example contrasts with the classic belief of sacred groves to be left untouched and unharmed. People most of the time preserves the forests because of the inherent idea of mutual benefits. The practice of shifting cultivation similarly speaks volumes. But even in the practice of shifting cultivation, the communities left several of the useful trees unharmed as D.D. Kosambi illustrated in case of the *mahua* trees. This process of shifting cultivation is prevalent even today in the northeastern part of the country which shall be discussed later in the paper. (Gadgil, M. 2018) [1](#)

The process of shifting cultivation and agriculture was mostly prevalent during a time when the concept of private property and capitalism was unknown and unventured in the world. It changed once feudalism and later capitalism showed up in the scene. However, in the Indian literature such a change could be noticed from a time back from 3,500 years ago when kingdoms were established and large tracts of lands and forests were burned down for settled agriculture. Such examples point largely to the fact that environmental preservation was rooted in practicality and practice.

The paper will attempt to look at all the angles through which sacred groves in India, focusing mainly on Northeast India has been on a decline and the reasons surrounding it. It will first collect stories of sacred groves in the world as a whole and then focus on Northeast India relating its stories to that of other parts of India and the world. However, the focus of the paper will largely be on the depletion of sacred forests in Northeast India and how this has caused a chain reaction in the larger destruction and extinction of flora and fauna.

### **Ecological spirituality around the world**

Sacred groves have been protected and recognised around the world from a long time. It signified how local communities of a particular place preserved and held certain parts of the ecosystem as sacred. These local sacred groves out of which several of them were recognised by the modern nation-states, signified the autonomy and cultural practices of the local communities around the world.

Starting with the continent of Africa, the oldest and original home of humankind, most parts of the continent have over the centuries witnessed the practice of maintaining sacred grooves. In East Africa, grooves of certain trees are warned not to be touched with an axe, break its branch or even the grass beneath it and not disturb or attack the wildlife that seeks shelter in those grooves. Sacrifices of goats and sheep were made to satisfy the gods for rain and good harvest. In Sierra Leone of West Africa, several plants and trees with medicinal values were regarded as sacred. For several centuries, the people of Ghana believed that sacred forests held spirits which should not be angered. After several conflicts with the new modernising impacts like mining and building of new roads, the government of Ghana has recognised the socio-cultural importance of sacred groves for the communities of the nation. In the Northern African country of Egypt, there existed an ancient practice whereby it was necessary for every temple precinct to hold a sacred groove and a sacred river by its side. In Zimbabwe and present-day South Africa several such grooves exist till the present day.

In Western Asia, the Babylonians and Assyrians planted sacred grooves from time to time. Christians who were known for not strictly believing in nature worship were at the same time known for protecting an olive tree and built a church near it, believing it to be a praying ground of Jesus. In Armenia, Christians till the present date tie pieces of clothes and sacrifices sheep near groves that they consider as sacred. In North Asia, the practice was sharper with several nomadic tribes who believed certain groves to be so holy and sacred that even the grass or a drop of water of those groves were avoided from being cut and consumed. In Korea, Japan, and China the prevalence of Buddhism ensures the safe existence of sacred forests. Chinese people were traditionally known to worship mountains as sacred and left its rich fauna and flora untouched. Few forests in China were regarded so sacred that they believed Gods to be dwelling there and movements of human kinds were strictly restricted from the forests. The monasteries and shrines at the same time became an abode for trees and shrubs, connecting its sacred element to that of the monastery. In Bali, Philippines, the interesting existence of the sacred monkey forest connects it to the ancient Hindu epic Ramayana and its chivalrous character of Hanuman who is depicted as a monkey god. In South Asia, the traditional practice of maintaining sacred groves is both a story of the past and the present. It could be found from Burma to India. Regarding India, sacred groves could be found from the extreme north in Himalayas to the extreme south in Kerela. The tribal groups of Central India namely the Gonds and the Bhils maintained sacred groves and made it necessary for every village to maintain a sacred grove. In Uttar Pradesh a certain forest of *Sal* trees was regarded as sacred and cutting of trees were strictly restricted to ritualistic practices and only those trees or its parts on the verge of decay were selected to be cut. These consciousness regarding environment and its element of spirituality was the major reason of tribal uprising in the 1930s and 1940s. In Karnataka and Kerela in the south, evidence of sacred groves could be found in temple compound, village lands or private properties.

In Europe too, the evidence of existence of sacred groves is seen in ancient Greece and Scotland as well. In Sweden and Finland, groves were considered so sacred that even whistling was not allowed near the groves and animals like bears were considered sacred as well. In France, a Germanic race considered sacred forests as the epitome of the human race and the abode of gods towards whom everyone should be ever obedient.

In Oceania, Australian aboriginals maintained the tradition of believing in sacred groves. They preserve countless variety of trees for a variety of cultural and ritualistic practices. The Maoris of New Zealand believes in the intimate relationship between humans and environment and deeply valued the existence of sacred forests. On the other hand, the native Americans believed that every creature on the Earth is sacred in their own sense. Felling of trees were restricted as trees were believed to have spirits that could heal people. Permission for grazing and other activities had to be taken with the needed sacrifices or the angry trees were said to take revenge by withholding rain. (Hughes, J.D., and Chandran M.D.S)

The existence of sacred groves around the world played as an excellent example of the communities divided by geography but united by the practice of maintaining sacred groves.

### **Sacred Forests in Northeast India**

Northeast India is the hub of nature and it is mostly known for its unique biodiversity in India and the world. Majority of Northeast Indian states consists of around 80 percent forest covers. At the same time, Northeast India is a land with various ethnic groups, for instance, the state of Assam itself is the home to a number of ethnic tribes from Bodo, Rabha, Tiwa to Karbi, Dimasa, and the Mising tribe. These tribal communities of Assam along with the tribal communities of the other Northeastern state highly depended

on the nature for their livelihood and survival and hence most of them holds forests and its preserving flora and fauna as sacred and pivotal in the survival of their race.

Starting with the state of Assam, the gateway of Northeast India, houses more than two hundred sacred groves. The Dimasa tribe for generations protected the practice of maintaining sacred groves. They referred such sacred groves as *Daikhos*, which means the abode of local and clan deities. Several scholars contest that maintaining daikhos is a local traditional practice and cannot be related with that of sacred groves. Others say the opposite of it is true. There are forests in and around Assam rich in its production of bamboos, jackfruits, a variety of berries, and medical plants and shrubs. Interestingly these very plants and shrubs with high medicinal value were considered sacred. This can be explained with the practice of *khandaihuma* in Dima Hasao. The parents of younger children seek advice from a fortune teller regarding good health of their children. On advice from the very fortune teller, the parents are advised to worship a particular tree in a particular grove with sacrifice of animals like goats and chickens. The child hence for a lifetime cannot harm or cut that particular kind of tree in his lifetime for the sake of his life and health. This practice on interviews with the local people were said to be performed on male child as women were not allowed inside such groves. One can highlight the issue of male domination here. In the neighbouring district of Karbi-Anglong, there was a strong belief of appeasing the spirits before entering the groves in such of medicinal plants or hunting of animals. Small sacrifices of animals and betel leaves and areca nuts were made before entering the forests. Apart from sacralising forests, villages communities in and around maintained a compound with trees and plants and destroying it was considered as an ill-omen. This practice is defined locally as *gerkho* which can be related with daikho. The Vaishnavite shrines of Assam, locally known as the *Satra* is famous for its ecological preservation in areas like Barpeta and the river island of Majuli. (Kikhi K and Gogoi, P.P. 2023) [i](#)

Assam's neighbour Meghalaya has been the home of sacred groves and has for generations followed the ritual of sacralising forests. The Mawphlang sacred grove is held in such high esteem that the locals believe that even plucking a flower or breaking a branch in the grove would invite bad luck, ill health or worse even death. The grove which is of the modest size has its replica built in the National Museum of Mankind in Bhopal. (Karlsson, G.B. 2011) There are more than two hundred groves in Jaintia Hills alone. Cherrapunji in Meghalaya, also known as the wettest place on earth nurtures groves that are believed to be protected by gods and spirits. In the past, villages maintained local groves as sacred but the practice has been mostly extinct now. (Hughes, J.D., and Chandran M.D.S)

The hub of biodiversity and the largest state of Northeast India, Arunachal Pradesh houses around 121 sacred groves including the Donyi-Polo sacred grove that sacralises the moon and the sun deities and the Hoolock Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary which is the mingling spot of conservation, protection, and tradition. The locals also believe that certain animals and birds along with trees like the Banyan and Pipal tree should not be harmed as it was believed to attract ill omens or curses. [i](#) The Apatani valley of Arunachal houses the Lyago type of sacred groves. These are small in size and is just up to few acres of land. The village clans nearby maintain a sacred grove and water reservoir called the *Shukhung*. The West Siang district which is located in one of the most strategic locations of Arunachal, near the Mac-Mohan Line, is the sanctuary to three of the state's sacred groves, namely, the Malinithan sacred grove, the Akashiganga sacred grove and the Mechuka Gompa sacred grove. These are just a handful of sacred groves in the state amongst the many others.

Similar to its two neighbours, Manipur too is known for its distinctive and rich flora and fauna. The Meitei community of Manipur dedicates a particular part of land in the forest to *Umanglai* or sacred deities of the

land. They ritualise the sun, the moon and elements like water and fire. They believe the ritualised patch of land to be the dwelling ground of deities and annually celebrate the *Lai-Haraouba* to please the deities of the forest. There are around 166 recognised sacred groves in Manipur. The belief system of the village masses helps to preserve the sacred forests till the present date. The village masses are mostly illiterate and their lack of specialised skills regarding modern technologies, keeps them devoid from the modern recruitment system. This forces them to rely on the forest heavily for nearly as large as 90 percent of their needs. However, with rising encroachment, the existence of sacred groves is diminishing but at the same time, revivalism of sacred groves is also in practice. (Khumbongmayum A.D., Khan M.L. and Tripathi R.S. 2004) [1](#)

Nagaland is known for the Dzukou Valley Sacred Grove which is located between Manipur and Nagaland and is often known for its tourist attraction. Similar to other sacred groves, the Dzukou valley sacred is protected by the traditional belief systems of the local communities, mostly the Nagas, that it is the dwelling spot of spirits and gods. [1](#) The Lushai tribe of Mizoram is known for protecting and maintaining sacred groves like the Reiek Tlang sacred grove. Every Mizo village maintains a sacred grove called the *Ngawpui*. The size of such sacred groves varies from one forest to another. The silent rule is not cutting any trees of the premise and allowing only those to be cut which are decaying. The Mizo tribes have a strong belief in the connection of nature and humanity and so strongly believes in the sacredness of the relationship between nature and its species. They too like their fellow Northeastern tribes, believes sacred groves as the abode of God.

Under section 12 of the Mizoram Forest Act, 1955, three types of forests in Mizoram are recognised. The first is the Village Safety Reserves which are strictly protected from any kind of human activities. The second is the Village Supply Reserve which are allowed to be used by the local tribes to meet their daily needs of fuel and fodder. The third is the Protected Forest Reserves which are protected against any kind of encroachment activities, except through permissions granted by the state government, much like the Village Safety Reserves. The matter of decaying trees in such reserves are also considered by the government and is used as per the needs of the people. (Krishna N and Amirthalingam M , 2014) [1](#)

In Sikkim, known as the eastern Himalayan state, *devithans* are ritualised by the Nepali community. In the village of Biring, the devithans are ritualised through normal everyday practices. The *dharas* or springs of the devithans are accessible for people to collect water but it is not allowed to wash clothes or utensils as it is believed that it would pollute the spring and dry it up. While devithans literally means the abode of a devi or a female goddess and so most devithans are allowed to be accessed only by females. However, in most cases devithans are built on private lands of the people, meant for the worship of the clan or the tribe, irrespective of their genders. (Acharya A and Ormsby A, 2017) [1](#)

The idea of sacred forests in Northeast India provides an identity and meaning to the region to a great extent. It silently showcases the interdependent relationship between human beings and nature and people's belief in supernatural entities in the present 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Sacred Groves as an Imaginary Realm

In the book "The Unruly Hills," the author describes an incident where on visiting the world famous Mawphlang sacred grove, his wife was disappointed on seeing just a piece of land with several trees. Here, the author describes the fallacy of his wife's imagination of sacred groves as something grand and in consistence with modern norms. He quotes Madhav Gadgil here defining how the notion of protected forest is an inheritance from the West and how it cannot be applicable to the Southeast Asian or South



Asian contexts. (Karlsson, G.B. 2011)

Gadgil explains how in the West with changing modern times, the cosmocentric man living in harmony with nature changed into the destructive anthropocentric man. The flexibility of Hinduism in India with its several diverse practices has ensured the protection and conservation of sacred groves in the subcontinent. The many tribal cults of the country with their pagan beliefs either remained out of the Hindu fold or inculcated their traditional practices in the expanding Hindu sect. These local clans and the tribals holds the badge of protection of the idea of sacred groves in the region. The popularity of Hinduism in India, made the communities of every corner inherit some of the Hindu rituals and unite it with their traditional belief systems. This led to small idols of Hindu Gods being placed in the sacred groves, making it sacred for both the locals and the mainstream Hindu communities. The system of shifting cultivation in the hilly regions of India, including the Northeastern regions of India is responsible for the protection of the idea of sacred groves in the region. The communities practicing shifting or jhum cultivation considers certain patches of land sacred, hence protecting its rich vegetation and in turn protecting the very biodiversity of the land. (Gadgil M and Chandran Subash M.D.1992) [i\)](#)

Here the conflict of imagination arises between the West and the other parts of the world, mainly the South Asian counterparts. The concept of sacred forest has become like an extinct concept in the modern times for the West and has been replaced by the concept of sustainable development. In South Asia, the concept of sustainable development often intermingles and at other times, contrasts with the idea of sacred forests. Divinity as an element plays an important role here as the divine nature of sacred groves in India in general and Northeast India in particular connects the local communities emotionally and spiritually to the forests and its flora fauna, they consider sacred. In most part of the West, this connection of divinity with that of nature is alien and they preserve and sustain because of the logical reasoning of survival and the future not solely or completely due to any divine interpretation. This difference in the belief system brings in the conflict in ideas of preservation of nature between the two parts of the world.

The further idea of confrontation and the connection between sustainability and sacred forests has to be investigated into to understand and contextualise it in the Northeast Indian context.

### **Contesting Ideas surrounding Nature and its Impact on the Local Communities**

The Inner Line Regulations were introduced by the British in Northeast India in around 1873 which divided the hills and plains of the region and left the hill tribes with relative autonomy. The colonial officials in general did not interfere much into the social and other matters of importance in Northeast India which was collectively ruled by various chieftains of various clans and tribes. The introduction of tea did alter the whole scenario but yet it could not strip the belief systems of the people.

The contesting ideas about sustainability and sacralisation of nature both intermingled from roughly the colonial time period. Due to the building of railways, roads and later the two World Wars, people from Northeast were diverted from their traditional way of livelihood that mostly depended on forest produce and agriculture. With evolving times, the concept of protecting biodiversity emerged that planned ecological development by keeping the human question out of it. While several laws in all the states of Northeast India have been crafted regarding accessibility of certain forests and its produce to the local communities around, it is not always efficient and free from chaos. These new laws regarding environment and land use have shown to be challenging in Northeast India and have given rise to the twin factors of eviction and encroachment.

Northeast India is known for having 64 percent of its areas covered with forests of its total geographical

area but the rate of depletion in the region is alarming. The mountainous and hilly terrain of the region makes it difficult for the people to develop settled agriculture and hence shifting cultivation has proved to be the most viable option in the region. The slash and burn practice of jhum cultivation has been wrongly described to be destructive towards the environment. Professor P.S. Ramakrishnan has said that the only destructive element in shifting or jhum cultivation is the lack of replenishing period. It was 25-30 years' time period earlier, but the population boom has reduced the time period to 5-6 years which is not enough for revival of the soil quality and vegetation. The Northeastern states have banned shifting cultivation with Tripura government making re-use of the jhum cultivation lands for rubber plantation. This has proved to be disastrous for the locals who solely depended on the practice. (Chatterjee S. 2008) [1](#)

The new land policies of the government get the people evicted from their homes and the same people are blamed for encroachment while entering protected forests for resources and for grazing. Sikkim is the only state in Northeast India, that allows grazing limitedly in its protected forests or sanctuaries. Forest fires, poaching and the conflict between humans and wildlife has only increased the problems in the region.

India's independence, partition and creation of Bangladesh has in the past drastically affected the lives of the people of Northeast India. These events divided people and their homes or agricultural lands on the wrong side of the border, inviting chaos and conflicts. It also affected the fluid and borderless trades of the local communities. Instead of being solved, these problems are just mounting and taking new shapes and directions in the present.

### **The Loss of the Belief System**

The Northeastern region of India as mentioned earlier is known for its diversity and hence diverse cultural and traditional practices. The region mostly has never been in the fold of Hinduism as it has been in other parts of India as the local communities had their own unique belief systems that were mostly connected with nature. But with the arrival of the colonial masters, the region received a fresh transformation socially with the introduction of missionaries and modern education.

The locals who mostly sacralised the forests and the elements of earth were encouraged to follow the monotheist path of Christianity. The introduction of modern education exposed the locals to greater opportunities other than just farming and agriculture. The introduction of railways and modern technologies engaged the population in industries and sectors other than the ones directly related to nature itself. This led to people migrating to other emerging hubs of the country and led to demographic changes and gave rise to a population that believed less and less on the idea of sacred forests. The migration of business and trade opportunists from other hubs of India into Northeast has led to drastic changes in the area. With the growth of new factories, shopping malls, branches of world or pan-Indian companies and other such developments in the region of Northeast, job opportunities for locals in the region has widened. The influx of people in the capital or growing hubs of the states like Guwahati in Assam, Dimapur and Kohima in Nagaland and Shillong in Meghalaya and the emergence of several skill development centres in the region is the classic example of the changing perceptions and belief systems of the population of the region.

Northeast currently is divided into two factions on the question of sacred forests and sustainability. The one faction that is content with the new ideas and opportunities and the advent of government controlled protected forests and the other faction that is fighting against the authorities concerned for revival of their traditional rights, leading up to several harsh confrontations. A middle way is sought and decided upon where needs of the people would be considered by the authorities.

The last three decades mostly after the advent of globalisation has altered the region in several ways. Bengt. G. Karlsson in his “Unruly Hills” have described the area of Cherrapunjee in Meghalaya as wet desert. The region known for its abundance of rain is ironically facing the worst of water crisis. The desertification of Mawsmat, which was a well-preserved sacred forest at a time depicts the sad reality of the region. The constant conflict between the new and traditional ideas of sustainability has shadowed the region to a great extent.

### **The Reality and the Way Forward**

Northeast India is plagued with several other issues that are affecting environment either directly or indirectly. Pollution, Deforestation, Encroachment and Urbanization which were alien terms for the region several years back, is the sad new reality now. The intra-state, inter-state ethnic conflicts and confrontations with the government has moreover added to its decay. The capital and industrializing hubs of all the eight states have been facing alarming rates of pollution and population explosion. The region faces the problem of high inflation with the lowest of per-capita income. The recent developmental drives of the government are bringing the people in direct confrontation with the government. Taking for instance, the recent case of Assam, the government decision to cut down trees as old as 200 years which houses unique species of birds and animals, riled up a commendable amount of people including young students out on the streets in protest. The government’s solution of transplanting the trees to other areas were also seen as scientifically impossible due to the exotic roots of the trees.

To solve the problem regarding environment, the problems surrounding human beings needs to be altered positively as well. As the transformers of their surrounding environment, human beings should possess the right to a good, secure life to focus on their surrounding issues other than fixating on their livelihood and survival.

Moreover, as all size does not fit all, all grand schemes of development does not suit all the regions equally. Northeast India known for its uniqueness and diversity should come up with their own draft of grand development suited to the region. To revive its green past and to work towards its green future, Northeast India needs to create a green idea that is in harmony with the nature and its diverse population.

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