

# Typology of sacred groves and their discrimination from sacred sites

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*Inadequate awareness on the typology of sacred groves is perceived to be the major cause for misinterpretation of some unnoticed, naturally preserved, deep-seated and concealed sacred sites established within the thickets of the Himalayan mountains and forests as 'sacred groves'. This results in an invalid typification and incorrigible documentation of the priceless virgin ecosystems generating surplus sacred groves and creating a chaotic and debatable situation which may hamper their development for sustainable benefits. A more rationalized definition encapsulating the typological parameters of sacred groves is given here and the major criteria of differentiating them from sacred sites are provided.*

**Keywords:** Discrimination, sacred groves, sacred sites, typology.

THE blend of criteria provided recently by various workers in designating sacred groves appears to be based on a comprehension that sacred groves 'comprise of remnants of pristine forest or cultural artifact embedded in a thickly forested site in vicinity of any place of worship, bearing some historic anecdote of the grove, with a shrine created for the deity in a dedicated place regarded as "genius loci" or spirit of the place, where rituals are performed'<sup>1-4</sup>. Such considerations reflect inadequate awareness on the standard typological characters of sacred groves, which results in the misinterpretation of sacred/religious sites as sacred groves. A necessity is therefore realized to evolve a rationalized concept of sacred groves with unique, consistent and concrete parameters, to strengthen their typology<sup>5</sup> and underpin the conceptual demarcation between the two closely allied terms – sacred groves and sacred sites (Table 1).

## Typological parameters of sacred groves

The term 'sacred' implies some extraordinary attributes which stimulate feelings of power, mystery, awe, transcendence, peace and healing<sup>6,7</sup>. Trees are a form of nature which represent life and the sacred continuity of spiritual, cosmic and physical worlds and are the first temple of gods<sup>8,9</sup>. Trees may be 'holy', 'blessed' or 'sacred', depending upon the religious attitude of people towards them. A 'holy' tree is a species of which all parts are worshipped, e.g. *Ficus religiosa* Lev. (peepal), *Ficus benghalensis* L. (bargad). A 'blessed' tree<sup>10</sup> is an abode of angels or a deity who protects it, and is revered due to

the religious dedication of people who worship it with an intention to please the deity within (e.g. the 'Kalpvraksh' – *Adansinia digitata* L.). 'Sacred' trees are those which are subjected to practical manifestation of worship, adoration and profound veneration to honour a deity or to please a devil, demon, or any other ghostly creature, provide sanctuary for spirits, remind present generations of ancestors, or to protect a sanctified place from willful damage and exploitation. Once linked with stringent religious or historical events, the sacred trees acquire a symbolic status to manifest the associated events and act as a path between man and god. The term sacred is strongly upheld by fear and awesome reverence of the associated gods and spirits<sup>11-13</sup>. The habitats which harbour only sacred trees in special environments, owned exclusively by the local clan responsible for their establishment, protection and supervision with special values limited to their own culture and religion<sup>14,15</sup> and with restricted human interference, emerge as 'sacred groves', derived from the desire of local people to live in harmony with numerous spirits that are believed to be associated with the natural environment, especially forests<sup>7</sup>.

The typology<sup>5</sup> of sacred groves depends on a number of factors associated with the tree cover and variously defined by different workers<sup>15-24</sup>. However, these definitions were 'ecological', derived from a botanical ideal (climax), not based on local understanding<sup>25</sup>. Later, Hughes and Chandran<sup>9</sup> provided a more comprehensive definition as 'Segments of landscape containing trees and other forms of life and geographical features that are delimited and protected by human activities believing that preserving such a patch of vegetation in relatively undisturbed state is necessary for expressing one's relation to the divine or to nature', which is more widely accepted.

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**Table 1.** Differences between scared groves and sacred sites

Sacred groves	Sacred sites
The basic components are – (1) Natural elements: the sacred trees. (2) Supernatural elements: the deities, demons, holy spirits or ghostly, weird characters residing in the trees. (3) Human ritual behaviours related to the trees for pleasing the divine/devilish figures. (4) Botanical criteria: climax vegetation and high biodiversity.	The basic components are – (1) Natural elements: religious monuments, temples, shrines and their historical relevance. (2) Supernatural powers: the deities which reside in a shrine and bless humans. (3) Human ritual behaviours related to the temple gods. (4) Anthropogenic criteria: development of pathway amidst the natural forest supporting biodiversity.
The deities or demons are abstracted from nature and are specific to the local clans. Anthropomorphic forms are rare and recent artifacts.	The deities are not abstracted from nature. They are the universal gods, angels or prophets and their anthropomorphic forms. Devils and demons are never worshipped.
The idol has direct correlation with trees within the grove.	The idol may not have any correlation with trees.
The worship of sacred trees has precedence over idols or any other artifacts.	The worship of idols has precedence; trees and woods may or may not be worshipped.
Religious customs are specific to the clan; often unnatural and unholy.	Religious customs are based on the pilgrim–deity association, performed using standardized methods.
All rituals are performed by the endogamous clan.	Rituals are performed by pilgrims and common people who visit the shrines on religious grounds, either directly or through priests.
Impermeable to common people even for prayers and worship.	Is the focus of pilgrims where people converge from all over for prayers and worships.
Kept under strict vigilance against entering, cutting, breaking, plucking or even touching plant specimens within the sacred area. Even picking the plant droppings is a taboo.	Vigilance is kept only against damage to the shrine, temple and idol within. There is no vigilance or taboo related to the plants around the shrine.
The trees species are remnants of natural, primary, evergreen forests <sup>27</sup> .	Tree species of surrounding forests have natural elements which may not be primary in nature.
All trees and their associated life-forms are considered sacred.	Only the monument, a temple, church, tomb, mosque, or memorial park <sup>39</sup> and the worshipped gods are considered sacred.
Plants are conserved by the authoritative clan, due to the associated beliefs and taboos attached to sacred trees to prevent any harm to the deity who would retaliate and take vengeance on the entire community.	Plants may get conserved inadvertently, if the sacred site is deep-seated within a forest outside the limits of human settlements and also escapes interference by virtue of being in the vicinity of a religious monument.

The seven major elements which define the typological characteristics of sacred groves are as follows.

- An abode of a supernatural power. The deities or demons worshipped within are abstracted from nature and believed to permeate through entire groves as indistinct beings such as tree spirits – Vanadevatas or Vanadevis; abstract weird creatures and evil spirits – atmas, bhutas, pretas, jinnas or animal deity – serpent (naga), panther and tiger<sup>26</sup>, often represented by vacant spots, crude stones and termite mounds and recognition of sacred trees inevitably precedes the associated idol or artifact.
- Piece of natural vegetation (in most cases). Sacred groves are comprised of multispecies, multi-tier virgin forest or a set of trees, of climax primary vegetation with keystone<sup>27</sup> species and rich floral diversity, a repository of specific genetic variants and remnants of species specific to the particular geographical region that might have succumbed to threats and perished from the denuded surroundings<sup>16,28–31</sup>.
- Well delineated physically/geographically. Sustained in anthropogenically undisturbed conditions amidst altered environment, sacred groves stand out as distinct, physically diverse patches of original vegetation, not merging with the enveloping tampered ecosystem, and having a rich representation of sacred trees within, compared to the peripheral buffer area and possess a characteristic water body<sup>32</sup>.
- Related to historical, cultural or religious issues. The adopted cultural practices depict the intrinsic spiritual perception, memories and values which local people attach to the sacred trees and the entire grove for which they are enshrined in the natural environment.
- Associated taboos. Every tree of the grove is considered sacred for religious reasons<sup>33</sup>. Sometimes, plucking of a small portion of plant specimen and even picking up dead wood and fallen leaves is a taboo and the entire patch is kept under strict vigilance of the local custodian. Within their precincts, the sacred groves are impermeable to even the slightest human interference<sup>34,35</sup>, fearing that it may disturb the gods and spirits and attract retribution<sup>36</sup>.
- Communal sanctity and protection from interference. The entire area is protected and the deity is propitiated periodically to ensure benevolence or to avert malevolence of the supernatural powers. The sanctity is based on the religion of the endogamous group and ceremonial procedures are specific to the clan, sometimes unique or even weird and unusual, often involving

animal sacrifices and blood offerings. The persons, generally elderly priests/priestesses, who perform these rituals and pray to the gods and spirits on behalf of the entire community are also defined.

- Ubiquitous values not restricted to specific religion or geographic territory. The deities, demons or other holy figures or evil spirits are independent of any religion and impervious to religious obligations. All values are self-designed based only on the beliefs of local clans. The authoritative community carries the responsibility to safeguard these beliefs, while ensuring the execution of traditional practice over generations.

Based on these criteria the rationalized definition covering all attributes of sacred groves is specified by the present author as ‘a physically diverse patch of natural, primary forested enclosure of sacred trees and connected life-forms, revered by the endogamous clan for their supernatural association with religious or ominous attribute, or some alarming mythological anecdote, ascribed to a deity, devil or a demon who is strongly bond with the woods, which are conserved informally over generations to uphold these beliefs’.

### Sacred sites

‘Sacred sites’ are ‘specific, discrete, narrowly delineated location on Federal land identified by a tribe, or individual determined to be an appropriately authoritative representative of the religion, as sacred by virtue of its established religious significance to, or ceremonial use by, the religion; provided that the tribe or appropriately authoritative representative of the religion has informed the concerned Government agency of its existence’.<sup>27</sup> They constitute active centres of regular worship and religious rituals with symbolic and tangible elements that interlink man and divinity and witness centripetal influx of pilgrims for worship and offering prayers.

The Himalayas in India are endowed with many such religious sites which devotees visit regularly for performing religious rituals and ceremonies. Among the most well-known sites are Vaishno Devi, Amarnath, Chandika Devi, Badrinath and Kedarnath in the Himalayas, Rameshwaram, Mahabalipuram, Bodh Gaya and Sarnath in other parts of India<sup>7</sup> and the Buddha Lumbini in Nepal, all bearing a historical significance connected to the Hindu mythology. The venerated deity of sacred sites is inevitably a god or goddess, an angel or a prophet, whose idol or other form or symbolic artifact, is established in the temple monument with religious sentiments. Devils, demons or other forms of unnatural, weird creatures are never worshipped here. The venerated gods of the shrines may not be associated with the trees and woods at all.

Many sacred temple forests in India are carefully managed and contribute immensely in preserving the landscape with natural floral and faunal wealth, by virtue of

their location in small pockets of hilly and mountainous areas often embedded and obscured by unapproachable, remote forest thickets. Such concealed sites are often left abandoned, unexplored and unnoticed in their inaccessible locations, falling outside human settlements and the forests in the vicinity of such sacred sites also enjoy unscathed natural conservation, sometimes to the same extent as the sacred groves. Many sacred sites are also endowed with primary vegetation and carve out a refuge for some rare tree species, such as the ‘sweet osmanthus’ (*Osmanthus fragrans*) tree in Chandak temple of Pithoragarh in Kumaon Himalayas<sup>37</sup>. The degree of vegetational conservation and vicinity of religious shrine paves way to misinterpretation of such sacred sites as ‘sacred groves’<sup>38</sup>. A meticulous appraisal of the typological criteria, coupled with the detailed scrutiny of the differentiating characters of the sacred groves and sacred sites, is therefore recommended as a prerequisite for designating such enshrined forested patches, as sacred groves, to avoid conflicts arising out of such classifications.

### Conclusion

Sacred groves and sacred sites are closely allied terms demarcated by very fine, but intelligible features. Divine powers are worshipped in both these sites, which are believed to be intimately and inextricably linked with forests and woods. Many such sacred/religious sites are embedded in deep and dense forests where human encroachments and interferences are negligible. The surrounding forests provide a sanctuary to important, sometimes virgin flora having curious plant species which may have been left unexplored, unnoticed or neglected in these inaccessible locations. The merits of sacred sites are so closely allied to sacred groves that unless these sites are scrupulously investigated and scrutinized in-depth for detailed behavioural strategies adopted by the local clans and their religious tie-ups which help in the protection of the trees in and around the religious sites, these are liable to be misapprehended as sacred groves, thus opening way to debatable situations and chaotic inventory of sacred groves. It is therefore suggested that while designating sacred groves, the typological criteria must be strictly followed in adherence to the basic guidelines of differentiating them from sacred sites. Once a sacred grove is typified or a sacred site is instituted, the same must be reported and registered formally with the concerned Government agency for future development and sustainable utilization.

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