



## Colloquial Variations in the Terminology of Sacred Groves in Indian States

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### Abstract

Sacred Groves (SGs) are micro hamlets enriched with immense biodiversity profoundly linked with cultural and religious beliefs and taboos of local communities. SGs are the spots of “Community Based Nature Conservation” which are sustained and preserved based on religious beliefs, conventional sentiments, traditional rituals and ceremonial customs more over enjoy enormous features of consistent anthropogenic interactions. SGs have significance in conserving rich biodiversity, floral and faunal endemism, maintaining the ground water level and ecological balancing where most of them act as micro-watersheds in refilling the groundwater level. SGs are erected and conserved for local deities or for worshipping any gods who are innately connected to the local tribes or clan. Due to sanctity and sacredness SGs are protected from the mining, encroachments, hunting, fishing and other extreme anthropogenic exploitations. Almost 1,00,000 SGs have been documented from Asia, Africa, America and Europe where the India (14000 Nos) and Japan (10000 Nos) gifted with more. SGs have different colloquial terminologies based on linguistic and cultural dimensions. Maharashtra is the Indian state highly enriched with SGs which are being termed locally as Devrai or Devrahati. Deo Bhumi / Bugyal and Sarnas or Deogudi are the local names for SGs in Uttarakhand as well as the Madhya Pradesh respectively. Kansa or Devara Kadu or Devrabana, Nagabana, Bhutappanbana, are considered “Gods Forest” or the sacred groves in Karnataka. SGs in Kerala locally known as the “Kaavu”. Some of the Indian states the SGs has no colloquial names documented so far.

**Keywords:** *Sacred Groves, Sacred Natural Sites, Community Based Nature Conservation, Kaavu, Deo Bhumi. Thirunandavana, Jahera.*

### Introduction

Sacred Groves (SGs) are the natural spots of dense vegetation with intense floral and fauna diversity. IUCN tags SGs as the Sacred Natural Sites (SNS). SGs are green specks sustained and preserved on religious beliefs, conventional sentiments, traditional rituals and ceremonial customs. SGs possess immense attributes of regular anthropogenic interactions, as they are managed and maintained by the local communities and their own strategies. SGs have significance in conserving floral and fauna endemism, maintaining the ground water level and ecological equilibrium. SGs play a pivotal role

in upholding religious beliefs and regional cultural customs. Through the worship of the deity, hereditary traditions, religious beliefs, and local customs (Malhotra *et.al.*, 2001, Chandran and Hughes, 1997) local stakeholders are performing a kind of “Community Based Nature Conservation” in the boundaries of SGs. Sacred outlook and divine dimensions shield of multi-diverse floral and fauna lifeforms exist in SGs from the intense alarms of mining, encroachments, hunting, fishing, and moreover extreme anthropogenic exploitations (Gold and Gujar, 1989). According to Gold and Gujar

(1989) the deep-rooted community belief of deity presence in the green hamlets of SGs supported endemism and ecosystem stability. SGs function as regional micro-watersheds in refilling the groundwater (Swamy *et.al.*,2003, Rajasri, *et.al.*,2015) moreover in conservation of water. Certain families maintain SGs as holy green patches as it is the sepulcher of their ancestors (Malhota *et.al.*,2007). Due to cultural and religious significance, anthropogenic interventions and interferences are reported fewer in the SGs than forests (Ramakrishnan *et.al.*,1998). Approximately around 1,00,000 Sacred Groves have been enumerated from Asia, Africa, America and Europe. India, Nepal, Japan, South America and African regions reportedly possess more SGs whereas India (14000 Nos) and Japan (10000 Nos) gifted with the green patches more. According to researchers Amrithalingam (2016) Indian state of Maharashtra is enriched with more sacred hamlets (1600) followed by Karnataka (1476) and Tamil Nadu (1275). Due to multidimensional reasons the SGs are under severe ecological tension, land encroachments, fragmentation, soil erosion, cultural invasion, alienations, religious intrusions, cultural invasiveness, excessive grazing and dumping of solid waste. SG fringe encroachment by the custodians or the stakeholders are reporting alarmingly. Fragmentation affects micro diversity and species distribution in SGs. As SGs are deeply

dependent on regional customs, traditions, and religious sentiments, the contemporary phenomenon of cultural invasion may be deadly harmful to the existence of SGs. Mixing up of the customs, cultural modernization, religious transpositions may cause the gradual deterioration and vanishing of SGs. More than the ecological significances, the ethnographic, theological, sociological and mythical dimensions of SGs to be appreciated (Alex, 2022). SGs have different colloquial terminologies based on linguistic and cultural dimensions.

### Colloquial Variations in the Terminology of Sacred Groves in Indian States

India is a land of many languages, cultures, religiousness, customs and traditions. Pan diversity of India is reflecting the SGs too. SGs in India possess various informal or local terminologies or names evolved based on linguistic and cultural grounds. Maharashtra is the Indian state highly enriched with SGs which are being termed locally as Devrai or Devrahati. Deo Bhumi / Bugyal and Sarnas or Deogudi are the local names for SGs in Uttarakhand as well as the Madhya Pradesh. Kans or Devara Kadu or Devrabana, Nagabana, Bhutappanbana, are considered "Gods Forest" or the Sacred groves in Karnataka. SGs in Kerala locally known as the "Kaavu". Some of the Indian states the SGs has no colloquial names documented so far.

**Table 1**  
(Name of Indian states shows the Local name of Sacred Groves)

Name of the Indian state	Local name of Sacred Groves
Karnataka	Kans, Devara Kadu
Madhya Pradesh	Sarnas, Deogudi.
Tamil Nadu	Thirunandavana, Kovil kadu, Swamy Thoppu, Swamy Sholai.
Andhra Pradesh	Pavitraskhetralu, Pavitravanams
Kerala	Kaavu

Arunachal Pradesh	Ranthii
Maharashtra	Devrai / Devrahati & Devgudi
West Bengal	Gramthan / Harithan / Sabitrithan / Jahera
Odisha	Jahera / Thakuramma
Chhattisgarh	Deogudi
Rajasthan	Oran / Malvan / Deora/ Rakhat Bani
Uttar Pradesh	Dev Van
Punjab	Jhidi
Jharkhand	Sarna
Bihar	Sarna
Uttarakhand	Deo Bhumi / Bugyal
Assam	Daikho
Manipur	Gamkhap / Mauhak
Meghalaya	Law Lyntang / Law Lyngdoh / Law Niam
Mizoram	Ngawpui
Sikkim	Devi Than
Himachal Pradesh	Dev Van / Devta ka Jungle
Chandigarh	Sarna / Devlas / Mandar
New Delhi	Dev Van
Jammu Kashmir	Bani

### Maharashtra

Maharashtra is the Indian state highly enriched with SGs due to the topographical and intense traditional reasons. Devrai or Devrahati is the local name of SGs in Maharashtra. Most of the SGs in Maharashtra are being erected and conserved for worshipping local deities. According to Deshmukh (1999) Maharashtra owns 2820 SGs. Sindhudurg district located in Konkan region has an abundance of sacred groves

followed by Ratnagiri, Pune and Kolhapur district respectively (CPREEC,2024). Demographic peculiarities and deep-rooted religious traditions and beliefs resulted in the increased number of SGs in Sindhudurg district. Ram, Maruti, Shiva, Kalika, Maladevi, Kalsubai, Kondai, Siddheswar, Nagdevi and Lingdev are worshiped and adorned mostly in SGs. Cultural distinctiveness and traditional peculiarities resulted in the

formation of increased SGs in Maharashtra (Waghchaure *et.al.*,2006).

### Karnataka

Kans or Devara Kadu or Devrabana, Nagabana, Bhutappanbana, are considered "Gods Forest" or the Sacred groves in Karnataka, which are deeply connected with the religious sentiments and traditional belief. Cultural relationship between the agrarian prosperity and SGs developed from the belief that ancestral god protects the crops until harvesting and provides best productivity. An approximate of 1476 SGs recorded from different parts of Karnataka (Chandran and Gadgil, 1998) with the domination of district Coorg due to the regional, geographical and traditional peculiarities (Kushalappa *et al.*,2001). Due to the increased density in the occurrence of SGs, Karnataka is regarded as the hot spot of SGs (Kushalappa *et al.*,2001).

### Kerala

SGs in Kerala locally known as the "Kaavu", depending on the deity worshiped, based on the worshipping deities Kaavu may be of Sarppa Kaavu, Bhagavathi Kaavu, Muthappan Kavuvu. Sarppa Kaavu are the Kaavu where the serpents are being worshiped, found commonly in different parts of the Kerala. In Sarppa Kaavu the special pooja and ceremonies would be conducted. The Bhagavathi (Goddess) and Ayyappan (God) are the deity embodiments being worshiped at Bhagavathi Kaavu and Ayyappan Kaavu respectively. Muthappan Kavuvu are dedicated exclusively for the Muthappan which is an incarnation of Shiva. Maintenance and management of the SGs may be under the individual families, trusts and governmental bodies. A comprehensive study on the multifarious aspects of SGs by Institution of Foresters Kerala (Kerala Forest & Wildlife Department, 2022) revealed that Kerala has 8501 SGs stretched out in ten districts

### Assam

Daikho are the holy patches of forest considered as the SGs in Assam, which are culturally and religiously related to the

indigenous community life. Daikho are spots of rich floral diversity. More than 40 Daikhos have been documented from the different parts of Assam (Kikhi and Gogoi, 2023).

### Madhya Pradesh

SGs in Madhya Pradesh, commonly called Sarnas or Deogudi are the holy patches of forests. According to (Rai 2014, Kala 2011, Sreevastava *et.al.*,2011, Masih & Homekar 2009) data from different studies there are 170 sacred groves found in Madhya Pradesh. Most of the SGs in Madhya Pradesh reflect tribal ethnic traditions, beliefs, local customs, ancestral deity dimensions and folklore taboos (Warrier *et.al.*,2023).

### Andhra Pradesh

SGs in Andhra Pradesh are commonly referred to as Pavitraskhetralu or Pavitravanams scattered across Andhra Pradesh. Worldwide Fund for Nature India formerly known as World Wildlife Fund India (1996) conducted a comprehensive study on the SG diversity in Andhra Pradesh identified 730 SGs from 23 districts of Andhra Pradesh. According to the WWF reports the districts, namely Kurnool and Chittoor possess more than 100 SGs. Floral and fauna diversity and species richness in SGs of Andhra Pradesh reportedly immense and medicinally significant (Satyavathi, *et.al.*2021, Lakshminarayana & Venkaiah 1998)

### Rajasthan

In Rajasthan people call SGs "Oran, Malvan, Deora and Rakhat Bani" which are the holy areas of forest land culturally, religiously and mystically connected to community life. Aravalli hills stretched in the northwestern part especially in Rajasthan are home to several tremendous SGs. Vindhya is yet another mountain range stretched through Rajasthan which holds many holy SGs (Shougrakpam, *et.al.*,2024).

### Uttarakhand

SGs of the state of Uttarakhand are commonly called Deo Bhumi / Bugyal, which are erected for the traditional goddess. Deo Bhumi / Bugyal are intertwined with the

traditions and cultural taboos of villagers or tribal communities

### Tamil Nadu

SGs in Tamil Nadu commonly called as the Thirunandavana, Kovil Kadu, Swamy Thoppu and Swamy Sholai. Most of these culturally and religiously linked forest hamlets are usually dedicated to the Hindu deities. Village gods, ancestral spirits, snake (Ayyappa/Ayyanar), Shiva and Vishnu incarnations are the major deity concepts behind most of the Thirunnandavanas. Amman is the prominent deity being worshiped in most of the SGs. Thirunnandavanas are intensely connected to village life where the people assemble for the local religious and traditional feasts, community gatherings. Forest department reports 1275 SGs scattered (Amarithalingam, 2012) in 31 districts of Tamil Nadu. People used to observe intense behavioral restrictions, ritual taboos and societal prohibitions in SGs and nearby areas (Amrithalingam, 2016).

### Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh is the Land of "Dawn-lit-Mountains" with tribal and ethnic diversity in addition to the extraordinary mountains that possess enormous species repositories. SGs in Arunachal Pradesh commonly referred as "Ranthii" (Dutta *et.al.*, 2017, Amrithalingam and Nanditha, 2014) mostly located in proximity of villages. According to Dutta (2017) and fellow researchers, the Ranthii are owned and managed by the villages and clans' communities with an intense religious, cultural sentiments and taboos. As the "Ranthiis" are owned by the local clans or tribal communities, the Ranthiis named after respective clans. Apatanis centered ethnic clan communities conserve the Ranthiis (Dutta *et.al.*, 2017) mostly as part of their traditionality and religious beliefs. Gompa Forest Areas (GFAs) are sacred forest areas widely called as SGs under the conservation of lamas and Mompa tribals. SGs and Buddhist monastery association has been remarkably revealed in many researchers;

moreover, the Tawang and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh reportedly has more GFAs (Murtem and Choudhary 2014). So far 65 SGs have been notified from the different parts of Arunachal Pradesh (Amrithalingam, 2016).

### West Bengal

Gramthan / Harithan / Sabitrithan / Jahera are the common names of sacred groves in West Bengal which are confined mostly in the tribal sentiments. Sitala, Garam, Manasa, Devimani, Makali are the common lords who are being worshiped in West Bengal SGs. (Sen 2018). 562 SGs reported from West Bengal located predominantly in the southern and western parts of the state (Maiti and Mitra 2023). SGs are emotionally and traditionally connected to the local tribal communities, backward classes of West Bengal (Deb, *et.al.*, 1997). Bamboo SGs maintained by Ranjbansi tribal communities are remarkable community-based nature protection (Sen 2018). The Districts of Purulia and Bankura are reported to have many SGs with flora and fauna diversity. 126 SGs seen on the eastern banks of Hooghly and one in the Metropolitan city of Kolkata reflects the ancestral, ritual dimension of community-based protection of hamlets of SGs (Maiti and Mitra 2023).

### Nagaland

Nagaland is a hilly northeastern state of India and possesses nearly 73.9 % forest area. Though no local names are documented yet, SGs are religiously and culturally deeply rooted in Nagalife (Magar, 2024).

### Bihar

SGs in the state of Bihar are commonly called as "Sarna" mostly found in the Chotanagpur regions. Every village has its own Sarna erected based on traditions and beliefs (Amrithalingam, 2014).

### Jharkhand

"Sarna" is the form of SGs maintained in the state of Jharkhand mainly by the Adivasi communities as part of their deep-rooted traditions, beliefs and taboos. Some of



the Adivasi communities like Oraon follow the “Sarna Dharam”, Sarnas can be easily identified as it usually has many holy sal trees, where the tribes may assemble for their special ceremonies and rituals (Oraon, 2024).

### Uttar Pradesh

SGs of Uttar Pradesh are commonly known as the Dev Van which are linked to the community culturally and religiously. 32 SGs have been reported from the various parts of the state which are dedicated to different deities. Most of the SGs in the state are erected for any Goddess or Lord Shiva.

### Odisha

Locally SGs are termed as Jahera and Thakuramma. According to Rath and Ormsby (2020) there are 2166 SGs reported from the state of Odisha confined mainly in the tribal belts. An ethno-cultural association is clearly visible in the SGs of Odisha as every ethnic group maintains their own SGs in the inhabited pockets. Jahera, Sarna, and Shal are different types of SGs which are maintained by ethnic groups. Malkangiri district of Odisha holds more SGs than others with culturo-religious heritage.

### Punjab

SGs are commonly called Jhidi maintained by the locals based on the religious and cultural sentiments that hold immense endemic and nonnative flora and fauna biodiversity (Singh, *et.al.*, 2021, Gurharminder, *et.al.*, 2024). No authentic studies has been conducted on the SGs of Punjab however the Bir Sikhanwala (Faridkot District), Tapoban Dhakki Sahib (Ludhiana District), Charpat Bani (Pathankot District), Tilla Puran Bhagat (Mukatsagar District), Derra Baba Mallo Ram (Bathinda District), Sant Sar (Muktsar Sahib District), Dargah Babab Ji (Roopnagar District), Kaya Kalp Vriksh (Fatehgarh Sahib District), Bhairon Jatti (Jalandhar District) are the notable among them. SGs in Punjab are Hamlets of biodiversity and possess rich cultural and religious beliefs and taboos.

### Chhattisgarh

“Deogudi” are the SGs found in Chhattisgarh maintained majorly by the tribal communities. The Bastar geographical region located in the southern Chhattisgarh has vast SGs. 600 SGs reported from the various parts of Chhattisgarh especially found more in the southern tribal belt and 22 in the Bastar region alone (Chandrakar, *et.al.*, 2024).

### Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur

Himachal Pradesh an Indian state enriched with 514 SGs approximately which are locally called as Dev Van / Devta ka Jungle (Thaplyal and Verma 2015). The Devi Than (Magar, 2024) are replica of SGs in Sikkim. People of Mizoram call SGs Ngawpui (Magar, 2024) in their colloquial linguistic sound. The Law Lyntang / Law Lyngdoh / Law Niam (Magar, 2024) are forms of SGs found in Meghalaya. Holy patches of forest in Manipur are known as the Gamkhap / Mauhak (Magar, 2024).

### Gujarat

Though no local names are documented yet, SGs are deeply intertwined with the community life of the people in Gujarat. Approximately 42 SGs have been registered from the Easter and central zones of Gujarat which are culturally connected to the local communities (Mevada, *et.al.*, 2020) erected and protected for deities like Khodiyar Mata, Oran Mata, Jhalai Mata. There were 33 SGs recorded from Dediapada Taluka (Mehul, *et.al.*, 2018).

### Haryana

Though no specific colloquial names have been recorded, approximately 57 SGs documented from different parts of the state. SGs are profoundly related to the culture and beliefs of the people.

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