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Research paper

Guardians of the Grove: The Role of Tribal and Dalit Women in Biodiversity Conservation through Sacred Forests

Priyanka Gupta * [a], **Amita Arjariya** [b], **Sadhana Chaurasia** [c]

[a] *Research Scholar, Department of Biological Science, Mahatma Gandhi Chitrakoot Gramodaya Vishwavidyalaya, Chitrakoot, Satna, M. P., India*
[b] *Prof. & HOD Botany, SoS Botany and Research Centre, Maharaja Chhatrashal Bundelkhand Vishwavidyalaya, Chhatarpur, M. P., India*
[c] *Prof. of Environmental Science, Department of Science and Environment, Mahatma Gandhi Chitrakoot Gramodaya Vishwavidyalaya, Chitrakoot, Satna, M. P., India*

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***Corresponding author**
Priyanka Gupta
Email
priyankagupta6264@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the ecological and cultural significance of sacred groves in Chhatarpur District, Madhya Pradesh, emphasizing the pivotal role of tribal and Dalit women in biodiversity conservation. Unlike urban temples that are architecturally ornamental and often disconnected from natural ecosystems, sacred groves are reserved forest patches sustained through indigenous spiritual practices and community-based stewardship. Symbolically marked by tridents, flags, and shrines, these groves serve as sanctuaries of untouched vegetation and medicinal flora.

Fieldwork was conducted across ten tribal-dominated villages, combining qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and direct botanical observations. The findings reveal that tribal and Dalit women are active managers of these ecosystems, guided by seasonal rituals, spiritual taboos, and sustainable harvesting techniques. Their intimate knowledge of sacred plants such as Peepal, Tulsi, Neem, and Ashoka underscores the integration of religious belief with traditional medicine and ecological resilience.

The research identifies sacred groves as one of the oldest forms of community-led conservation rooted in cultural heritage. However, modern pressures such as urbanization and erosion of belief systems threaten their sustainability. The paper argues that recognizing and empowering these women through legal frameworks, education, and inclusive forest governance is crucial for both biodiversity preservation and cultural continuity. Through this lens, sacred groves emerge not just as biological hotspots but as living embodiments of spiritual ecology and grassroots environmentalism.

1. Introduction

Chhatarpur District in Madhya Pradesh is a predominantly rural region where diverse communities coexist. My current research focuses on how tribal and Dalit women contribute to biodiversity conservation through the preservation of sacred groves patches of forest believed to be inhabited by divine or supernatural entities, often revered as manifestations of gods or goddesses. These groves are also referred to as virgin forests due to their untouched and pristine nature.

1.1 Sacred Groves vs. Urban Temples

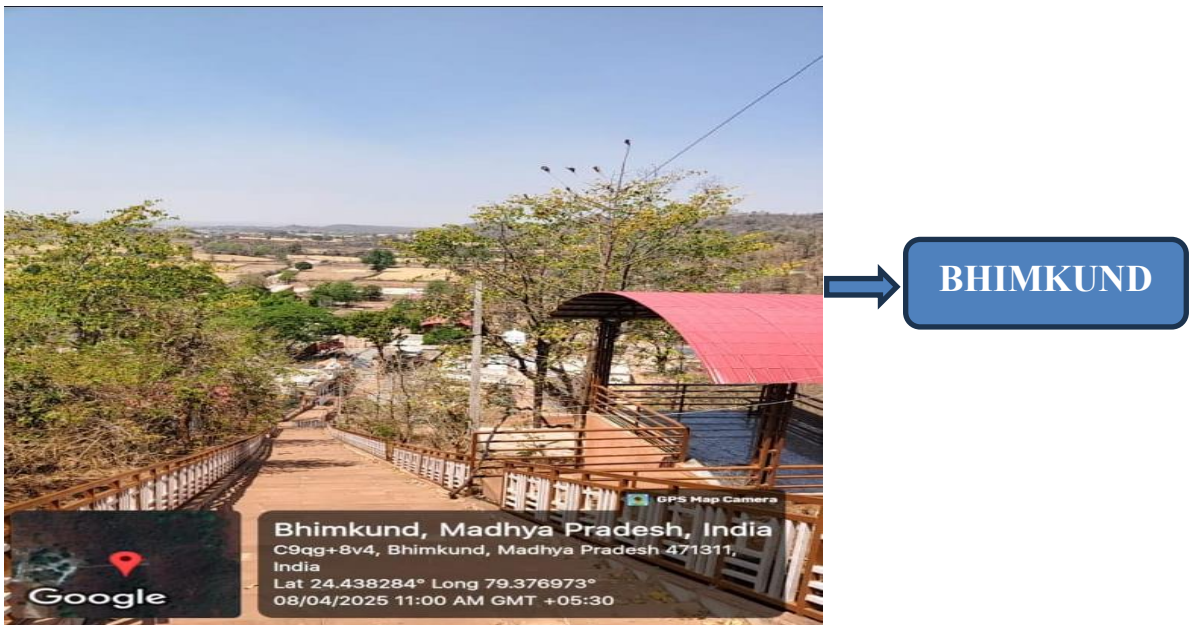
Sacred groves are marked by symbolic elements such as tridents (trisul), Madiya idols, flags, and small shrine-like structures. Unlike urban temples typically constructed with mosaic, marble, granite, tiles, and cement sacred groves are located on the outskirts of villages and are surrounded by naturally occurring vegetation. The biodiversity in these groves is notably rich due to minimal human interference, making them vital ecological sanctuaries. (Ray, Chandran, & Ramachandra, 2014).

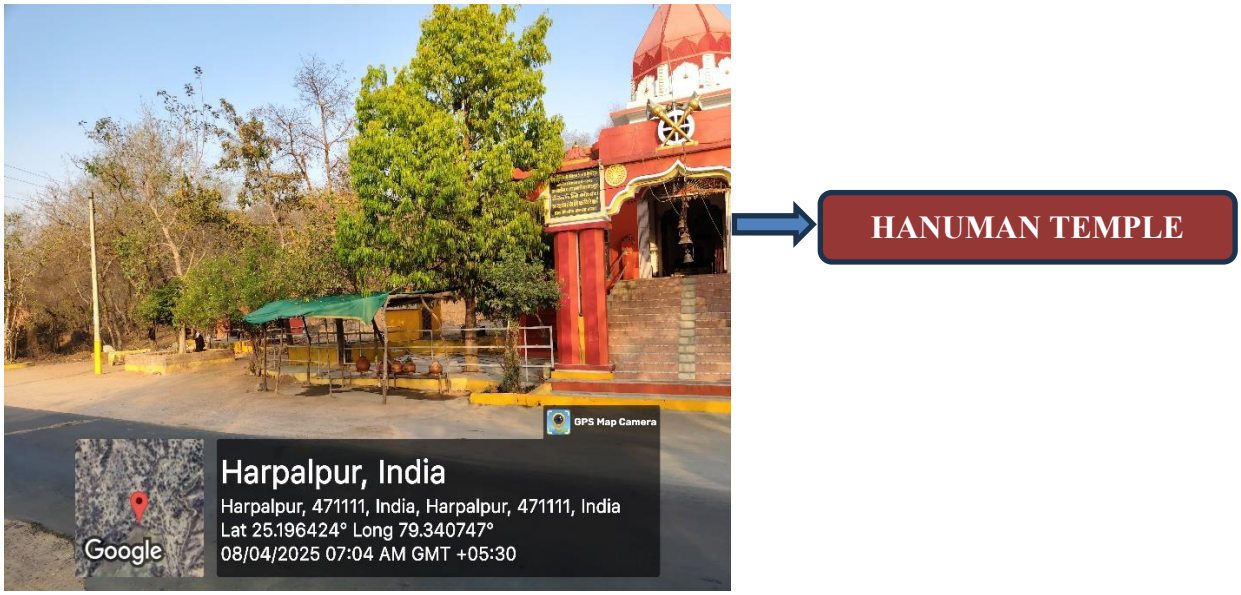
1.2 Community and Ecological Stewardship

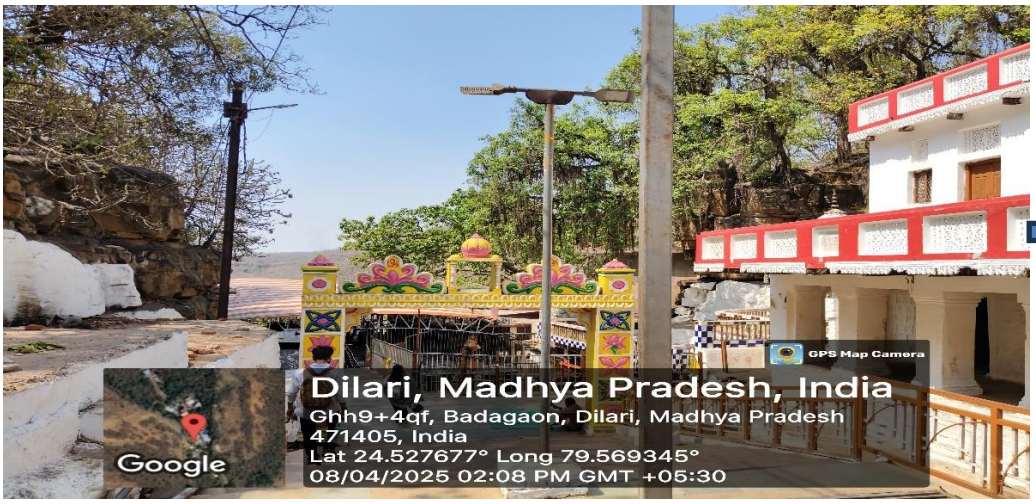
In the Bundelkhand region, tribal and Scheduled Tribe communities often reside outside the main village settlements. These groups play a crucial role in protecting sacred groves and forest patches, relying on forest resources to meet their daily needs. Their deep-rooted cultural and spiritual connection to nature fosters a strong sense of responsibility toward environmental stewardship.

1.3 Women as Guardians of Nature

Tribal women, in particular, are instrumental in conserving sacred groves. Their traditional knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and emotional ties to the land make them powerful custodians of biodiversity. Sacred groves represent one of the oldest forms of community-led conservation, blending ecological preservation with cultural heritage. (Kamath & Oza, 2002)







Some Sacred Grooves images their vegetation of Chhatarpur Districts

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Area

Chhatarpur District, Madhya Pradesh, focusing on tribal-dominated villages Jheejan, Dillari (Jatashankar), Bajna (Bhimkund), Hanuman temple, Ganj (swargeshwar), Gadha (Bhageshwar dham), Panotha (kudantaal), Matgwa (Chopadia hanuman), khop (taal), and Mausania (sanni mandir).

2.2 Data Collection

Qualitative Interviews conducted with 40 tribal and Dalit women across 10 villages. Focus Group Discussions held with elders, spiritual leaders, and forest users. Field Observations Documented flora, and symbolic markers (e.g., tridents, flags, shrines). Secondary Sources Reviewed academic literature.

2.3 Observation Table

List of some sacred plants found in Chhatarpur District

Local Name	Scientific Name	Family	Religious/spiritual belief	Medicinal Importance
Ashok	*Saraca indica* (also *Saraca asoca*)	Fabaceae	Sacred in Hinduism and Buddhism; associated with fertility and devotion; Sita stayed in Ashoka Vana in the Ramayana	Treats gynecological disorders, especially menstrual issues; uterine tonic; anti-inflammatory; used in bleeding disorders
Apamarga/Chirchita	*Achyranthes aspera*	Amaranthaceae	Mentioned in Atharva Veda; used in rituals and purification; considered a protector herb	Treats piles, skin diseases, respiratory issues, urinary disorders; used in Kshara Sutra therapy; anti-inflammatory, diuretic, antimicrobial
Bargad	*Ficus benghalensis*	Moraceae	Symbol of eternal life; associated with Lord Shiva; worshipped during Vat Savitri festival	Used for diabetes, wound healing, ulcers, immunity, and oral health
Chirayata	*Swertia chirata*	Gentianaceae	Revered in Ayurveda and Unani; used in purification rituals; considered a divine herb	Bitter tonic; treats fever, malaria, liver disorders, diabetes, skin diseases; anti-inflammatory, hepatoprotective, antioxidant
Gumchi	*Abrus precatorius*	Fabaceae	Seeds used in traditional jewellery and rituals; considered sacred in some tribal cultures	Used cautiously for joint pain, skin diseases, and as a purgative (seeds are toxic if not processed)
Kadamb	*Neolamarckia cadamba*	Rubiaceae	Associated with Lord Krishna; mentioned in ancient scriptures and poetry	Used for fever, inflammation, skin diseases, and digestive disorders
Kela	*Musa paradisiaca*	Musaceae	Associated with Lord Vishnu and Brihaspati; leaves used in rituals and offerings	Treats diarrhea, constipation, ulcers, dry skin, asthma; rich in potassium and antioxidants
Neem	*Azadirachta indica*	Meliaceae	Associated with Goddess Sheetala Mata; revered for purification and protection	Antibacterial, antifungal, antiviral; used for skin disorders, diabetes, oral health, and immunity

Nirgundi	*Vitex negundo*	Lamiaceae	Revered in Ayurveda; used in purification rituals	Anti-inflammatory, analgesic, treats arthritis, respiratory issues, and menstrual disorders
Palash	*Butea monosperma*	Fabaceae	Known as "Flame of the Forest"; sacred in rituals and tantric practices	Treats digestive issues, skin diseases, urinary disorders; used in Ayurveda for detoxification
Peepal	*Ficus religiosa*	Moraceae	Sacred in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism; Lord Krishna said "I am the Peepal among trees"; Buddha attained enlightenment under it	Treats asthma, skin diseases, ulcers, diabetes, and boosts heart health
Silk Cotton Tree/Semal	*Bombax ceiba*	Malvaceae (formerly Bombacaceae)	Sacred in tribal and folk traditions; used in rituals and healing ceremonies	Bark used for diarrhea and cholera; flowers for skin diseases; cotton for burns; decoctions for wounds and toothache
Shivlingi	*Bryonia laciniosa*	Cucurbitaceae	Associated with fertility and Lord Shiva; seeds resemble Shivling	Used in Ayurveda for female fertility, menstrual regulation, and reproductive health
Til/sesame	*Sesamum indicum*	Pedaliaceae	Used in Hindu rituals and offerings; considered auspicious; sesame used in lamps and purification	Promotes digestion; used in skin diseases, burns, ulcers; improves hair growth; laxative; treats infant diarrhea and bladder issues
Tulsi	*Ocimum tenuiflorum* (syn. *Ocimum sanctum*)	Lamiaceae	Sacred in Hinduism; considered an incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi and beloved of Lord Vishnu	Boosts immunity, treats respiratory issues, reduces stress, supports heart and liver health
Jaw (Barley	*Hordeum vulgare*	Poaceae	Used in Yajnas and sacred rituals; symbol of prosperity and fertility in Vedic traditions	Nutritional; used for cholesterol management, diabetes, digestion, and skin disorders.
Rice	*Oriyza sativa*	Poaceae	Central to many religious rituals and ceremonies across India; symbol of sustenance	Easily digestible; provides energy; decoctions used for skin conditions; helpful in diarrhea and fever
Paan (Betel)	*Piper betel*	Piperaceae	Offered in rituals, marriages, and temple traditions; considered a symbol of auspiciousness	Antioxidant ad antimicrobial; used for oral health, digestion, and respiratory discomfort; mild stimulant

These plants are not only revered for their spiritual significance but also play a vital role in traditional medicine and ecological conservations. Sacred groves in Chhatarpur often feature these species, protected by tribal and Dalit communities through cultural taboos and rituals. Hanfi, S. (2020).

Panch Pallav Plants: Religious and Medicinal Significance

Local Name	Scientific Name	Religious/Spiritual Belief	Medicinal Use
Aam (Mango)	*Mangifera indica*	Symbol of fertility and prosperity; mango leaves are hung at entrances during weddings to ward off evil an invite blessing	Leaves used for oral hygiene; fruit rich in vitamins; bark used for diarrhea and throat infections.
Bargad (Banyan)	*Ficus benghlalensis*	Symbol of immortality and longevity; worshipped by married women during Vat Savitri for husband's well-being	Bark and roots used for diabetes, toothache, and skin ailments; latex used in traditional healing
Jamun	*Syzgium cumini*	Associated with Lord Krishna; considered auspicious in marriage rituals and sacred offerings	Fruit helps manage diabetes; bark and seeds used for digestive issues and blood purification
Peepal	*Ficus religiosa*	Sacred to the Trimurti Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva; worshipped during marriage and fertility rituals	Treats asthma, constipation, skin diseases; bark used in traditional remedies for heart conditions
Salai	*Boswellia Serrata*	Resin (frankincense) used in sacred fire rituals; symbolizes purification and divine presence	Resin used for arthritis, inflammation, and respiratory disorders; known for anti-inflammatory properties

3. Discussion

Tribal and Dalit women's conservation practices are deeply intertwined with spiritual beliefs and survival strategies. Unlike urban temples, which are often ornamental and disconnected from nature, sacred groves are living ecosystems. The women's role is not just symbolic they actively manage these spaces

through rituals, seasonal restrictions, and sustainable harvesting.

The marginalization of these communities has paradoxically preserved their ecological wisdom. However, modernization, urbanization, and erosion of traditional beliefs pose threats to these groves. Empowering women through legal recognition, education, and community-based forest management is essential Menon, K.P. (2016).

4. Conclusion

The sacred groves of Chhatarpur District stand as living archives of biodiversity, culture, and spiritual ecology preserved not through formal policies but by the grassroots guardianship of tribal and Dalit women. Unlike urban temples built from cement and stone, these natural sanctuaries are marked by organic symbolism and divine reverence woven into the landscape. Rich with native vegetation and spiritually significant species, sacred groves embody one of the most sustainable forms of community led conservation.

The ethnobotanical knowledge held by tribal women passed down orally and practiced daily is instrumental in maintaining both the medicinal and ecological balance of these forests. Plants such as Peepal, Ashok, Tulsi, and Neem are venerated for their ritual importance and therapeutic properties, forming a botanical bridge between faith and healing. Cultural taboos, rituals, and festivals function as conservation tools, reinforcing protection through spiritual obligation.

In a region where marginalized communities often live at the periphery geographically and socially their central role in stewarding sacred groves challenges conventional narratives of conservation. Their practices blend emotional ties, ancestral wisdom, and ecological awareness into a resilient model that transcends generations.

Thus, sacred groves are not merely ecological zones; they are spiritual commons, health repositories, and cultural classrooms rooted in reverence and nurtured by women whose lives and labour reflect an unspoken environmental ethic. Recognizing and empowering these custodians is essential not only for biodiversity preservation but also for inclusive and culturally grounded approaches to sustainable development.

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