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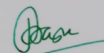
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Chapter - 1

Sacred Groves: The Indigenous Tools of Conservation

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Abstract

Sacred groves are undisturbed patches of forests that have been maintained over a period of several years by the local communities. They are mostly regarded as abodes of spirits that should be left undisturbed. It is for this reason that they are referred to as 'sacred'. Since the groves have been associated with many religions, cultures and traditions they can be considered as products of 'nature worship'. The myths, beliefs and taboos associated with them have helped to protect the diverse flora and fauna. Often, the biodiversity is higher than the neighbouring areas. They provide many ecosystem services like protection of soil against erosion and storing underground water. Currently, however, their existence is being threatened by anthropogenic interference. As such, steps should be taken to protect these indigenous tools of conservation.

Keywords: Sacred groves; Biodiversity; Conservation; Traditional ecosystem management

Introduction

Nature worship has been common in various forms in many primitive cults. Review of literature shows the mention of various animals like deer, cow, lion, tiger, elephant, peacock, owl, etc. and trees like peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) as sacred creatures that were worshipped in ancient India. Thus, nature worship existed in two different forms – 1) protection of isolated trees like bael (*Aegle marmelos*), banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*), etc. and worshipping them as divine entities, and 2) protection of patches of forests with all the trees, herbs, shrubs and climbers and considering the whole area to be sacred (Gadgil and Vartak, 1976). In the latter case, the patches were often associated with certain deities who lived in the forest and showered blessings on the local communities who protected the area.