



Sacred Groves of the Karauli District, Rajasthan: An Ethnobotanical Overview

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ABSTRACT

Sacred groves are forest fragments protected and venerated based on traditional religious and cultural beliefs, often dedicated to a local deity or ancestral spirit. These ecosystems, found across India, serve as crucial reservoirs of biodiversity and repositories of indigenous knowledge. In Rajasthan, sacred groves represent a vital, though understudied, link between cultural heritage and ecological conservation. This study provides an overview of the sacred groves in the Karauli district, documenting their locations, associated flora, and socio-cultural context. Field surveys identified 12 major sacred groves within the Keladevi Wildlife Sanctuary area, with 13 key plant species commonly conserved within them. The findings underscore the role of these groves in preserving regional ethnobotanical knowledge and native plant diversity, highlighting their significance for both cultural continuity and biodiversity conservation in a semi-arid region.

Keywords: Sacred Groves, Ethnobotany, Biodiversity Conservation, Karauli, Rajasthan, Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sacred groves, known locally as *Mandirvan*, *Mandir ka Bagh*, or *Vani*, are tracts of pristine forest preserved through indigenous systems of belief, often centered around a temple or a consecrated deity (Gadgil & Vartak, 1976). This tradition, with roots in ancient Indian practices that revered nature—as reflected in Vedic texts like the Rigveda (Kumar, 1995)—creates informal but highly effective protected areas. In Rajasthan, where conventional forest cover is sparse, these groves act as critical refugia for flora and fauna and preserve invaluable ethnobotanical knowledge (Jain, 1987).

The Karauli district, characterized by its unique physiography including the Chambal ravines and the Vindhyan scraplands, hosts several such groves, particularly within the Keladevi Wildlife Sanctuary. These sites

are not only spiritual centers but also sources of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) and ethnomedicines (Devi et al., 2005). This study aims to document and provide an introductory overview of the sacred groves in Karauli, focusing on their socio-cultural context and commonly associated plant species.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area: Karauli District, Rajasthan Karauli district, established in 1997, is located in eastern Rajasthan (India) and forms part of the Bharatpur Division.

- **Geography:** It spans a total area of 5,043 km², bordered by the districts of Dholpur, Bharatpur, Sawai Madhopur, and Dausa.
- **Demographics:** As per the 2011 Census, the district has a population of 1,458,248, a literacy rate of 66.22%, and a population density of 264 persons/km².
- **Culture:** The predominant language is Hindi. Hinduism (94.02%) is the major religion, followed by Islam (5.59%).
- **Administration:** The district comprises seven tehsils (Karauli, Sapotra, Mandrayal, Nadauti, Todabhim, Hindaun) and is subdivided into six sub-districts.
- **Physiography:** The region is part of the Rajasthan Plateau, featuring the Chambal plains with characteristic ravine topography and the Banas Basin. The terrain is a mix of uplands and alluvial plains, with an elevation ranging from 250–350 meters (Roy & Jakhar, 2001).

This overview is based on field surveys and ethnobotanical observations conducted in the Karauli district, with a focus on the Keladevi Wildlife Sanctuary region. Data collection involved:

1. Identification and mapping of sacred groves through consultations with local community members and temple authorities.
2. Documentation of locally used terms, associated deities, and conservation practices.
3. Botanical surveys within and around the groves to record commonly protected and planted species. Plant specimens were identified using standard floras.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Documented Sacred Groves Field surveys identified 12 significant sacred groves in the Keladevi Sanctuary area, each associated with a specific village and deity (Table 1). The size of these groves varies, typically ranging from one to several *bighas*, and they are often densely forested tracts adjacent to temples.

Table 1: Sacred Groves Documented in the Keladevi Wildlife Sanctuary Area

S.No.	Temple / Deity Name	Village / Location
1	Keladevi Temple	Keladevi
2	Bhairon Ji	Atewa
3	Bhairon Baba	Sapotra
4	Bhairon Nath	Mandrayal
5	Birvasan Devi	Ada Dungar
6	Bhoomiya Baba	Guriya
7	Heeraman Baba	Aduda
8	Thakur Baba	Badalpur
9	Kedar Ki Gufa	Keladevi
10	Mahadev	Kudka ki Khoh
11	Nasir Baba	Bheekampura
12	Bijasan Mata	Keladevi

Floristic Composition

A total of 13 plant species were consistently found to be conserved and venerated across the studied groves. These species hold cultural, religious, and ethnomedicinal significance (Joshi, 1989). For instance, *Azadirachta indica* (Neem) is often worshipped as *Neem Devta* by the Gurjar community, and its twigs are used in rituals.

4.3 Cultural and Ecological Significance

The groves function as living pharmacies and sources of daily necessities. The prohibition on felling living trees (though dry wood may be used for religious ceremonies) has allowed these patches to survive as biodiversity hotspots.

Table 2: Key Plant Species Commonly Found in Sacred Groves of Karauli

S.No.	Botanical Name	Common Name / Local Name	Family
1	<i>Achyranthes aspera</i> L.	Prickly Chaff Flower	Amaranthaceae
2	<i>Acacia catechu</i> (L.f.) Willd.	Khair	Fabaceae
3	<i>Azadirachta indica</i> A.Juss	Neem	Meliaceae
4	<i>Butea monosperma</i> (Lam.) Taub.	Dhak, Palash	Fabaceae
5	<i>Calotropis gigantea</i> (L.) R.Br.	Aak, Madar	Apocynaceae
6	<i>Canna indica</i> L.	Indian Shot	Cannaceae
7	<i>Feronia limonia</i> (L.) Swingle	Wood Apple, Kaith	Rutaceae
8	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i> L.	Banyan, Bargad	Moraceae
9	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> L.	Peepal	Moraceae
10	<i>Musa × paradisiaca</i> L.	Banana, Kela	Musaceae
11	<i>Ocimum tenuiflorum</i> L.	Holy Basil, Tulsi	Lamiaceae
12	<i>Phyllanthus emblica</i> L.	Amla, Aonla	Phyllanthaceae
13	<i>Prosopis cineraria</i> (L.) Druce	Khejri, Shami	Fabaceae

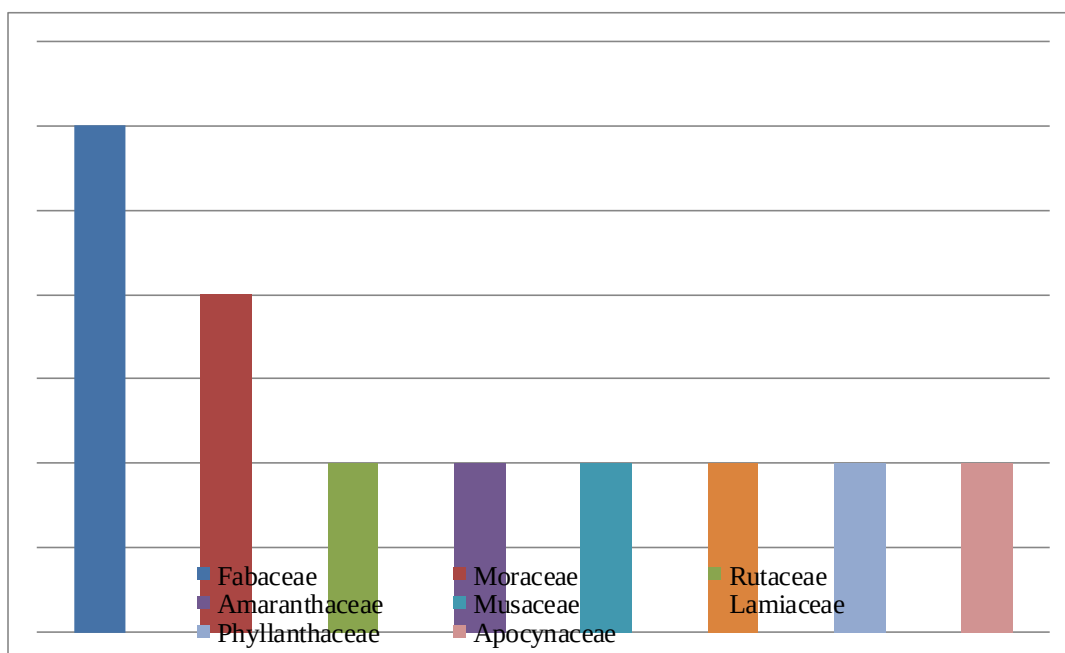


Figure 1: Showing plant families used as sacred groves

They play a vital role in soil conservation, particularly in the ravine-prone topography of the Chambal basin, and serve as micro-watersheds. The practice underscores a community-based conservation model where faith effectively enforces environmental protection (Malhotra et al., 2001).

CONCLUSION

The sacred groves of Karauli district are invaluable ecological and cultural assets. They safeguard a diverse range of plant species, many of which are ethnomedicinally important, within a fragile semi-arid ecosystem. This study confirms that these groves are not merely religious sites but are integrated into the traditional ecological knowledge system of local communities, contributing significantly to *in-situ* conservation. There is an urgent need for detailed scientific inventories of their biodiversity, coupled with efforts to document the associated oral traditions. Supporting these community-managed systems through sensitive policy and recognition is crucial for the preservation of both Rajasthan's natural heritage and its cultural identity.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

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