

Field excursion to the Kullu region's Sacred Groves in Himachal Pradesh, India.

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naturesciencemagazine.in

Article ID: nsm.2.1.1.1.17-20

Advancing Sustainability

Issue: December 2024

Introduction

In the developing world, rural communities guard and preserve sacred groves as areas of woodland. Deeply ingrained religious convictions guarantee that no tree is chopped down or any animal hurt within its borders. There are strong religious beliefs which ensure that no tree is felled or an animal is harmed within its boundaries. Since the groves are often the last remaining home for large, ancient trees, lianas, medicinal plants, macaques, deer, birds, lizards, frogs, and other animals that have become endangered elsewhere in the environment, naturalists view them as treasure troves. There are three existing categories of sacred groves: temple groves, which are groves created around a temple; burial or cremation or memorial grounds, which are groves created around graves, cremation sites, or on farmland, or near the grove of the village goddess; and traditional sacred groves, which are places where the village deity resides and is represented by a straightforward symbol. Each state or country has its own name for its sacred grove and its own deity.

As stated by Hughes and Chandran, "Sacred groves are areas of the landscape that contain trees and other geographical features and forms of life that are delineated and protected by human societies because it is thought that keeping them in a relatively undisturbed state is an expression of important relationship to the divine or to nature" (Hughes and Chandran, 1998). According to Yon Fernandez-de-Larrinoa, chief of the Indigenous Peoples Unit of the Food and Agriculture Organization, sacred groves symbolized environmental preservation and conservation before the concept of ecology was developed.

Devbans in Kullu, Himachal Pradesh

The Devbans, a type of wilderness in western Himachal Pradesh, are revered and regarded as the property of regional deities. The entire governance of the villages near the Devban is overseen by the Devta Committee, which is often composed of a number of strong caste members. The Devbans are located all throughout Himachal Pradesh, from the eastern parts (Kangra, Una, etc.) to the western parts (Kullu, Shimla, Mandi, etc.). Devbans are the property of the local deities, each of whom has been assigned a certain section of the hamlet. The Kullu Valley's devban is a crucial part of the devta system, which is a unique sociocultural religious institution in Himachal Pradesh. Every group of villages in Kullu has a devta, or god. There are believed to be over 300 devta according to the local inhabitants in the Kullu valley. Along with naturalistic and animistic animals like Nag (snakes), Vanshiras (forest guardians), and Jognies (fairies), many of the gods of the Hindu pantheon are worshipped as devta.

The Kullu devta are considered special by the villagers, who also see them as physical beings with property and familial links to the devta of nearby villages. The Kullu district's sacred groves are rich in spiritual and cultural value, and the community's respect for them is reflected in the variety of taboos that surround them. The ban on women entering the temple while menstruating is one such limitation. This custom stems from the idea that it would provoke the Joganis, the feminine gods connected to the groves, to become angry. Furthermore, it is completely prohibited to shout or make noise in the forest because these actions are believed to violate the area's purity.

In the local cultural setting, women are only allowed to wear bright red apparel when they visit the grove, which represents purity and respect. Additionally, members of the so-called "lower castes" are prohibited from entering the temple grounds due to traditional caste-based prohibitions. The ban on removing any trees from the sacred groves is a crucial ecological taboo area. Since these groves are said to be the homes of the gods, it is believed that cutting down trees would violate the area's holiness. In religious ceremonies, certain offerings are presented to the deities, including flowers, coconuts, sheep, and goats. Since they are deemed impure and insulting in this hallowed setting, leather and iron objects are absolutely prohibited inside the groves. The traditions and gender roles are also reflected in the groves' ceremonial customs. During processions, men are responsible for carrying the deity's chariot, among other exclusive duties. The men also serve as the deity's principal priests, highlighting a gendered divide of religious responsibilities.

List of Deities' locations and associated Sacred groves

In the present field visit conducted in March – June 2024, a total of 43 sacred groves were listed from 5 blocks of Kullu district namely Kullu, Naggar, Banjar, Anni and Nirmand (Table 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). It is clear that from table 1 that the maximum number of sacred groves were documented from Kullu block with total 17 sacred groves followed by Naggar block with 10 sacred groves (Table 1). The least number of sacred groves have been covered in other 3 blocks which include Nirmand and Anni both having 5 sacred groves (Figure 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6).

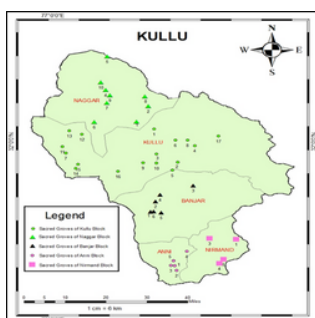


Figure 1: Map showing the locations of documented sacred groves of district Kullu.

Table 1: List of the documented Sacred Groves in Kullu Block

S.no.	Name of deity and village	Name of panchayat	Area	Altitude (m)	Coordinates
1	Adi Brahma, Rodgi	Shili Rajgiri	30 Bigha	2255	31° 51.752' N 77° 17.272' E
2	Mata Ashapuri, Moulhan	Bhalan-1	14 Bigha	1909	31° 49.325' N 77° 14.749' E
3	Brighu Rishi, Ashani	Jestha	12 Bigha	2045	31° 52.276' N 77° 14.479' E
4	Durwasa Rishi, Palgi	Bhalan-1	5 Bigha	2111	31° 49.595' N 77° 15.911' E
5	Bradhi Veer, Bhalan	Bhalan-1	5 Bigha	2758	31° 48.251' N 77° 14.682' E
6	Triyugi Narayan, Diyar	Diyar	200 Bigha	1880	31° 50.649' N 77° 12.163' E
7	Katrushi Narayan, Bhalayani	Bhalayani	29 Bigha	1934	31° 56.757' N 77° 02.827' E
8	Amal Narayan, Narol	Garsa	5 Bigha	1948	31° 49.688' N 77° 13.938' E
9	Luxmi Narayan, Raila	Raila	9 Bigha	2058	31° 47.433' N 77° 19.009' E
10	Shouth Nihargad, Nihargad	Bhalan-1	40 Bigha	1400	31° 51.187' N 77° 04.136' E
11	Panchali Narayan, Rujag	Shili Rajgiri	10 Bigha	1727	31° 58.614' N 77° 02.123' E
12	Devi Jogni, Nagani	Shili Rajgiri	0.5 Bigha	2445	31° 52.661' N 77° 66.638' E
13	Nag Devta, Nagani	Shili Rajgiri	5 Biswa	2430	31° 52.661' N 77° 66.638' E
14	Baba Veer Nath, Janahal	Shili Rajgiri	10 Bigha	1950	32° 52.688' N 77° 04.912' E
15	Saptal Rishi, Sori	Khadihar	150 Bigha	1685	31° 53.580' N 77° 03.457' E
16	Renuka Mata, Shiah	Manjhali	1 Bigha	1757	31° 13.861' N 77° 13.857' E
17	Jagtham Rishi, Barshaini	Barshaini	4 Bigha	2282	32° 00.093' N 77° 26.551' E



Figure 2 (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I): A few of the deities' temple photographs and related sacred groves collected during a field visit in Kullu block.

Table 2: List of the documented Sacred Groves in Naggar block.

s.no	Name of deity and village	Name of panchayat	Area	Altitude (m)	Coordinate
1	Kali Nag, Karal	Devgarh	82 Bigha	1946	32° 04.094' N 77° 05.768' E
2	Jamdagni Rishi, Chhani	Katrian	100 Bigha	1549	32° 06.229' N 77° 07.795' E
3	Shandil Rishi, Shilin	Shilin	6 Bigha	2144	32° 11.187' N 77° 10.767' E
4	Hadimba Mata, Dungi	MC Ward-1 Manali	31 Bigha	2039	31° 14.905' N 77° 10.856' E

S.no.	Name of deity and village	Name of panchayat	Area	Altitude (m)	Coordinates
5	Jamdagni Rishi, Soel	Soel	10 Bigha	1907	32° 08.927' N 77° 11.033' E
6	Larain Mahadev, Larankelo	Nathan	4 Bigha	1548	32° 05.327' N 77° 08.532' E
7	Kartik Swami, Khakmal	Gojra	8 Bigha	1897	30° 10.670' N 77° 11.665' E
8	Chamunda Mata, Nashala	Nathan	3 Bigha	1773	31° 05.449' N 77° 09.635' E
9	Sharwari Mata, Shuru	Prini	31 Bigha	1961	32° 12.012' N 77° 12.216' E
10	Dani Devta, Gojra	Gojra	20 Bigha	2056	32° 13.675' N 77° 16.105' E

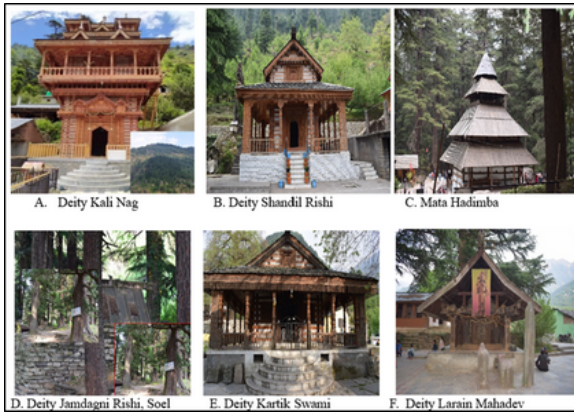


Figure 3: Photographs of deities' temple and related sacred groves collected during field visit in Naggar block.

Table 3: List of documented Sacred Groves in Banjar block

S.no.	Name of deity and village	Name of panchayat	Area	Altitude (m)	Coordinates
1	Bungru Mahadev, Deutha	Deutha	6 Bigha	1870	31° 40.753' N 77° 20.709' E
2	Ishwar Mahadev, Demeyoli	Palahch	40 Bigha	1694	31° 39.278' N 77° 21.050' E
3	Luxmi Narayan, Bagni	Kalwari	1	2011	31° 39.540' N 77° 22.468' E
4	Shankhchool Mahadev, Patahara	Shangad	128 Bigha 14 Biswa	2100	31° 45.768' N 77° 22.846' E
5	Shesh Nag, Chhant	Jibhi	3 Bigha	1835	31° 35.334' N 77° 21.120' E
6	Jamdagni Rishi, Tindha	Deutha	5 Bigha	2255	31° 40.751' N 77° 21.391' E

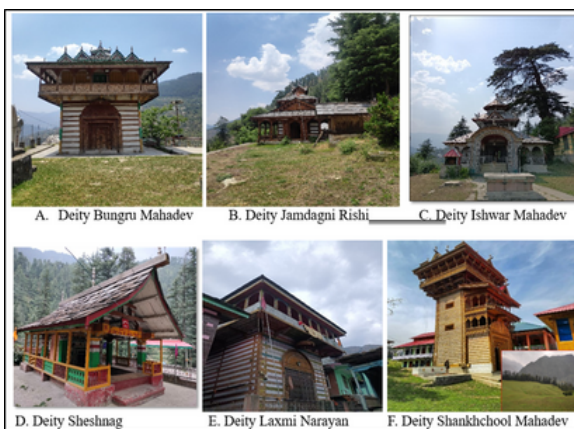


Figure 4: Photographs of deities' temple and related sacred grove collected during field visit in Banjar block

Table 4: List of documented Sacred Groves in Anni Block.

S.no.	Name of deity and village	Name of panchayat	Area	Altitude (m)	Coordinates
1	Bhajhari Kot, Kot	Lajheri	10 Bigha	2368	31° 30.817' N 77° 25.048' E
2	Jogeshwar Mahadev, Dalash	Anni	4 Bigha	1985	31° 23.098' N 77° 26.016' E
3	Pachhla Devi, Deori	Javan	8 Bigha	1726	31° 25.155' N 77° 26.280' E
4	Vyas Rishi, Kuiner	Mohan	1.5 Bigha	1657	31° 28.115' N 77° 21.446' E
5	Shamshar Mahadev, Shamshar	Chowai	6 Bigha	1385	31° 26.997' N 77° 25.860' E



Figure 5: Photographs of deities' temple and related sacred grove collected during field visit in Anni block.

Table 5: List of documented Sacred Groves in Nirmand Block

S.no.	Name of deity and village	Name of panchayat	Area	Altitude (m)	Coordinates
1	Ambika Mata, Nimmand	Nirmand	12 Bigha	1392	31° 25.492' N 77° 34.296' E
2	Jalandhi Rishi, Sarahan	Sarahan	35 Bigha	2382	31° 32.475' N 77° 32.173' E
3	Kali Mata, Baga Sarahan	Sarahan	35 Bigha	2367	31° 33.029' N 77° 32.078' E
4	Natli Nag, Ram Gadh	Nishani	1 Bigha	2407	31° 26.615' N 77° 35.465' E
5	Natli Nag, Sunehra	Nishani	1.5 Bigha	1796	31° 26.724' N 77° 34.636' E

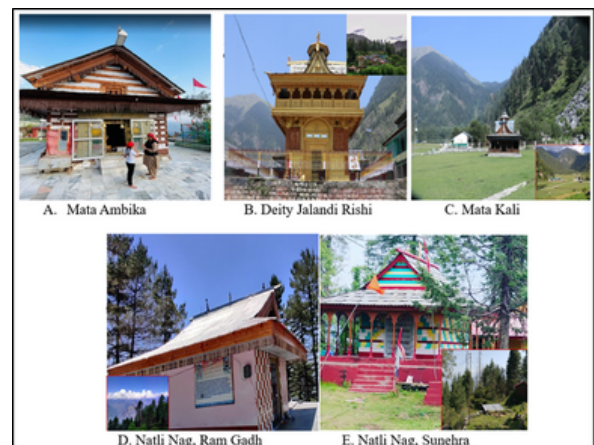


Figure 6: Photographs of deities' temple and related sacred grove collected during field visit in Nirmand block.

Ecological Importance of Devbans

According to the Kullu region's indigenous inhabitants, sacred forests or groves connected to their deities are heavenly spaces that must be preserved in order to respect and please the gods. These ideas support stringent taboos, which conserve the local flora and fauna by forbidding activities like hunting, grazing, and tree-cutting. Since the groves are frequently connected to streams and springs, their holiness guarantees that these natural resources stay uncontaminated. The groves' sustainable methods of performing rituals and making offerings demonstrate a peaceful coexistence with the natural world. This cultural respect is maintained generation after generation, which fosters a sense of collective responsibility within the community and creates a self-sufficient system that safeguards water supplies, biodiversity, and the natural equilibrium of these sacred sites.

References

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Cite as: Supriya K, Thakur N, Kapoor H (2025) Field excursion to the Kullu region's Sacred Groves in Himachal Pradesh, India, *Nature Science e-Magazine*, Vol. 1, Issue 6 (17-20).



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