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Sacred Groves: India's Ancient Biodiversity Hotspots

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Sacred groves are patches of forest or natural vegetation that are traditionally protected by local communities due to religious or cultural beliefs. These groves are considered the abodes of deities, spirits, or ancestors, and their preservation reflects a unique confluence of ecology and spirituality. Found across India, sacred groves play a crucial role in conserving biodiversity, protecting water sources, and maintaining ecological balance.

Historical and Cultural Significance

The tradition of sacred groves in India dates back to ancient times. These forests have been mentioned in scriptures such as the Vedas and the Puranas. They are integral to the spiritual and cultural life of many indigenous and rural communities, who believe that cutting trees or harming any life form within these areas would anger the residing deity and bring misfortune.

Geographical Distribution

Sacred groves are spread across various states in India, with prominent examples in:

- Kerala (e.g., Kavu groves)
- Maharashtra (Devrai)
- Karnataka (Devarakadu)
- Rajasthan (Orans)
- Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand

Each region has its unique traditions and types of flora and fauna preserved in these groves.

Ecological Importance

Sacred groves serve as micro-reserves of biodiversity. They often host rare, endemic, and medicinal plant species, along with diverse animal and bird species. These groves act as seed banks, carbon sinks, and water recharge zones. They are crucial for pollination and maintaining genetic diversity, especially in areas where natural habitats are dwindling.

Threats and Conservation Challenges

Despite their importance, sacred groves face threats from urbanization, logging, encroachment, and weakening of traditional belief systems. The younger generation often lacks awareness of the cultural and ecological significance of these areas. Legal protection is limited, and many groves fall outside formal conservation programs.

Conservation Efforts and the Way Forward

Efforts are being made by NGOs, local communities, and researchers to document, revive, and protect sacred groves. Awareness campaigns, eco-tourism, and inclusion in school curricula can help re-establish their importance. Policies should support community-led conservation, provide legal recognition, and integrate traditional knowledge with modern science.

Conclusion

Sacred groves represent a powerful example of traditional conservation practice. As modern India grapples with ecological degradation, learning from these ancient biodiversity hotspots can guide us toward a more sustainable and spiritually enriched future.