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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BELIEFS AND INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR MAINTENANCE OF SACRED GROVES OF KHASI HILLS, MEGHALAYA

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing concern for the decline of sacred groves, measures for implementation of the various conservation strategies suggested by various organizations and researchers are still on the rough track. This study was conducted in West Khasi Hills and East Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya using standard social science methods. It was found that several sacred groves of the district have been immensely degraded and a good number of them have lost their sacredness with time. Some of them have been converted into community forests while others have been commercially exploited. A significant reduction in area of these natural heritages was noticed and unless suitable mechanisms are put in place, most sacred groves of the district will be lost. The beliefs and traditional institutional mechanisms central to conservation and continued existence of sacred groves are eroding and science behind the concept is not percolating among the communities who had maintained the sacred grove since time immemorial.

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INTRODUCTION

Sacred groves are one of nature's greatest mysteries. They are forest fragments of varying sizes, which are communally protected, and which usually have a significant religious connotation for the protecting community. India has the highest concentration of sacred forests in the world. Estimates suggest that there might be between 100000 and 150000 sacred forests around the country (Malhotra *et al.* 2007). They occur mostly in the north eastern and southern part of the Indian subcontinent. Hughes and Chandran (1998) have defined sacred grove as "segments of landscape, containing vegetation, life forms and geographical features, delimited and protected by human societies under the belief that to keep them in a relatively undisturbed state is an expression of an important relationship of humans with the divine or with nature". It is believed that the existence of sacred groves dates back several thousands of years when human society was in the primitive stage of development. Gadgil and Vartak (1975) have traced the historical link of sacred groves to the pre-agricultural, hunting and gathering stage of societies, before human beings had settled down to raise livestock or till land. Biodiversity value and content of sacred groves of Meghalaya have been studied by Tiwari *et al.* (1998) where the rites and rituals associated with the sacred groves of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills have been described and documented. According to the

information published by NIC in its website, there are around 103 sacred groves in the state which are spread among the different districts, with East Khasi Hills having the maximum number of sacred groves and Ri Bhoi district, the least. There is however paucity of research on belief and institutional mechanisms that are central for the maintenance of sacred groves of Meghalaya. This study is an attempt to fill in the gap in this area of sacred grove research.

The Bio-cultural heritages

The tribal communities in Meghalaya have been preserving small patches of virgin forests since time immemorial based on religious beliefs. These forest patches, popularly known as sacred groves, serve as refugia for large numbers of endemic and rare plants of the region. The sacred groves in Khasi hills of the state are linked with the traditional "Khasi" faith or religion and were established by the forefathers of the Khasi people as a kind of bond between man and god. Almost all the sacred groves in Meghalaya are associated to a particular event in history, which might be an establishment of a kingdom, truce between two territories or a form of memory for the dear departed. For instance, the sacred grove in Phyllud, West Khasi Hills was established when the two Nongri lot sisters, who established the village, parted ways; the sacred grove in Peinlang was established by the first king when he came to settle there in the village. It is believed that a god, commonly known as the "basa" resides in these groves. It is a kind of spirit sent by the heavenly gods to look after the dwellers of

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that particular village where the grove is present or even mankind as a whole. This "basa" may appear in the form of animals such as snakes, tiger or leopard. It also protects the grove and prevents from poachers and other people from damaging the forest. It is said that if anyone does anything that affects the integrity of the grove such as hunting of animals in the grove, felling of trees without proper permission or damaging the forest trees and plants, the basa punishes him by making him sick, turning his head backwards or even causing death. As such, people usually do not dare to go against these taboos. Thus, sacred groves become repository of biodiversity.

Study Area

The study was conducted in the West Khasi Hills and East Khasi hills districts of Meghalaya. The West Khasi Hills District lies in the central part of the state of Meghalaya and is situated between approximately 25°10' and 25°51' N latitude, and between 90°44' and 91°49' E longitude. It is bounded on the north-west by Kamrup district of Assam, on the north-east by Ri Bhoi district, on the east by East Khasi Hills district, on the south by Bangladesh, on the West by East Garo Hills and South Garo Hills districts. The district comprises an area of about 5,247 sq kms which is 23 percent of the total area of state. Nongstoin, covering an area of about 76.00sq kms, is the Headquarters of the district. The climate of the district is mildly tropical in the northern and southern foothills, while in central upland zone, the climate is temperate and places at medium altitude in the northern, western and southern parts of the district, experience sub-tropical climate. The district is influenced by the south-west monsoon and rainfall is assured during summer, but differs greatly in intensity from area to area within the district. The average rainfall ranges from 1200 mm to 3000 mm per annum (National Informatics Centre website, Nongstoin District Unit). The East Khasi Hills district occupies an area of 2748 km² and it lies between 25°07" and 25°41" N latitude and 91°21" and 92°09" E longitude. It covers a total geographical area of 2,748 km² bounded by Ri-Bhoi District of Assam on the north, Karbi Anglong District on the north east, Jaintia Hills district on the east, Bangladesh on the south and West Khasi Hills district on the west. The East Khasi Hills District is mostly hilly with deep gorges and ravines in the south.

The most important physiographic features of the district is the Shillong Plateau interspersed with river valley falls sharply in the southern portion forming deep gorges and ravine in Mawsynram and Shella-Bholaganj bordering Bangladesh. Shillong peak lying 10 kms. from the city, offers a panoramic view of the scenic country side and is also the highest point in the district as well as in the state. The climate of the district ranges from temperate in the plateau region to the warmer tropical and sub-tropical pockets on the northern and southern regions. The whole of the district is influenced by the south-west monsoon which begins generally from May and continues till September. The weather is humid for the major portion of the year except for a relatively dry spell usually between December and March.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Village weekly markets of the study area were surveyed on the market days to gather information regarding the sacred groves. This kind of survey helped in obtaining information regarding the presence or absence of sacred groves in the villages falling in the catchment area of the markets, the number of sacred groves, their status and ownership. The 'Syiems' (traditional kings) were approached for further information and permission to visit the sacred groves falling in their territory. Further permission was taken from the concerned owners such as clans, private individuals or village headmen as the case may be for on the spot survey and observations about the health and status of the grove. Using this approach, a pilot survey was made in the villages of West Khasi Hills and East Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya. The village headman and other knowledgeable persons were interviewed for collecting data and information on the beliefs and institutional mechanisms put in place for the maintenance of sacred groves in the village.

RESULTS

Altogether, 23 sacred groves sites were investigated. It was observed that they had varying kinds of managing institutions and ownership rights. As mentioned earlier, Tiwari *et al.* (1998) had documented a total of 79 sacred groves in Meghalaya, excluding South Garo Hills with 13 sacred groves in the West Khasi Hills.

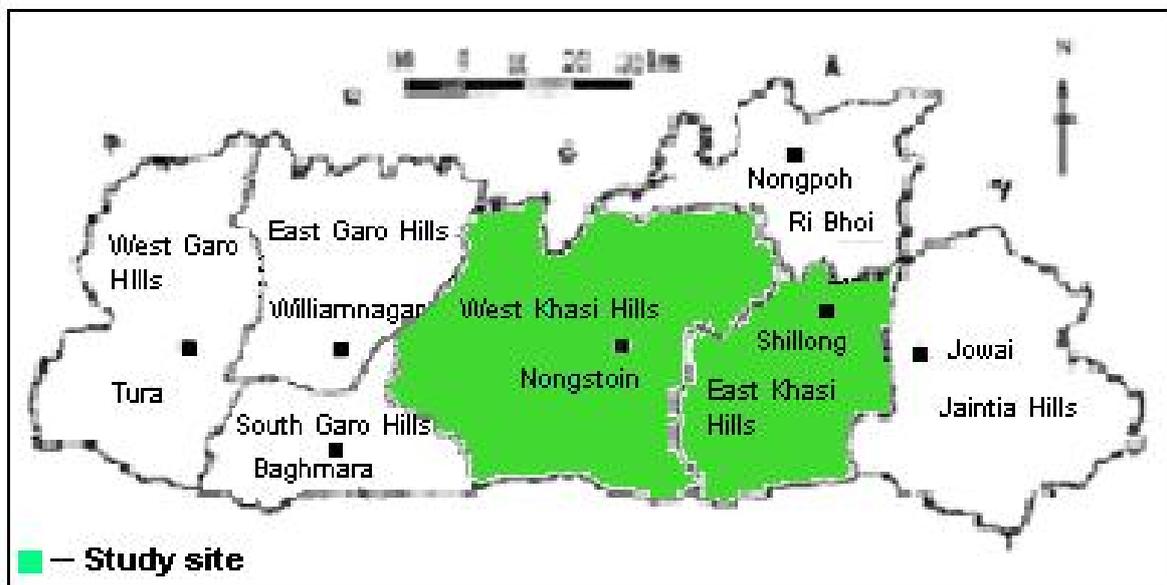


Figure 1. Map showing the study sites in the state of Meghalaya

Table 1. Distribution of sacred groves in different districts of Meghalaya

S.No.	District	Number of sacred groves found
1	East Khasi hills	38
2	West Khasi hills	19
3	Jaintia hills	35
4	Ri- Bhoi	3
5	East Garo hills	8
6	West Garo hills	8

Table 2. Sacred groves in the West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya

S.No.	Name of the grove	Location (village)	Owned by	Status	Area (approximate in ha)	Managing institution
1	Law Siarpa	Diangshyang, Nongstoin	lawren Neng, lawren tban, lawlar clan	Sacred	11	None
2	Law Lyngdoh Mawnai	Mawnai, Mairang	Lyngdoh Mawnai	Not Sacred anymore	10	Clan committee
3	Law Lyngdoh Nongrang/Kur	Mawkohmet, Mairang	Lyngdoh Nongrang clan	Sacred	4	Clan committee
4	Law Lyngdoh Rynthathiang	Mawkohmet, Mairang	Lyngdoh Rynthathiang clan	Not scared anymore	3.5	Village durbar
5	Law Kyrza	Ri Khian, Mairang	Thabah/ Lyngdoh Kyrza clan	Not scared anymore	5	Village durbar
6	Law Lyngdoh Nonglait	Lawbyrtun	Lyngdoh Nonglait clan	Sacred	10	Clan leader/Clan committee
7	Law Nonglynkien	Nonglynkien, Mawkyrwat	Lyngdoh Umiong clan	Not sacred anymore	11	Private individuals
8	Law Sakwang	Sakwang, Mawkyrwat	Community	Sacred	6	Village durbar
9	Law Lyngdoh Nongsynrih	Nongsynrih, Mawkyrwat	Lyngdoh Nonglang clan	Not sacred anymore	5	Private individuals
10	Law Lyngdoh Mawlot	Phyllud, Mawkyrwat	Lyngdoh Mawlot clan	Sacred	6	Clan committee
11	Law Lyngdoh Peinlang	Peinlang, Mawkyrwat	Lyngdoh Peinlang clan	Sacred	3	Clan committee
12	Nongbri sacred grove	Pyndeng-Nongbri	Nongbri clan	Sacred	5	Clan committee
13	Wahlang-nongklung sacred grove	Nongstoin, Nongklung	Wahlang clan	Sacred	10	Clan committee
14	Wanniang Sawkpoh sacred grove	Chimawlein	Chimawlein clan	Not sacred	7	Clan committee
15	Diengliengbah sacred grove at Rngikseh	Pariang	Mawiang Syiemship clan	Protected	0.5	Village durbar

Table 3. Sacred groves in the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya

S.No.	Name of the grove	Location (village)	Owned by	Status	Area (approximate in ha)	Managing institution
1	Law Kyntang Symper	Syper	Raid	Sacred	4	Raid durbar
2	Lum Kyntheh Kluin	Mawkliaw	Community	Sacred	3.5	Village durbar
3	Law Adong Laitryngew Sacred grove	Laitryngew	Community	Degraded	20	Village durbar
4	Swer sacred grove	Lum Swer	Nongrum, Dohling and Shanpru	Protected	12	Village durbar
5	Kharai law lyngdoh sacred grove	Nongkhieng	Raj Nongkhieng	Not sacred anymore	150	Clan committee
6	Law Lyngdoh Mawshun	Mawshun	Khongdkhar, Rymjah, Khongbuh, Massar and Nongsteng	Degraded	100	Clan committee
7	Law Lyngdoh Lyting Lyngdoh	Lyntiiew, Pynursla	Raj Lyting clan	Degraded	100	Clan committee
8	Raid Shabong Law Adong	Wahpathew-urksew, Pynursla	Raj Shabong clan	Degraded	700	Village durbar

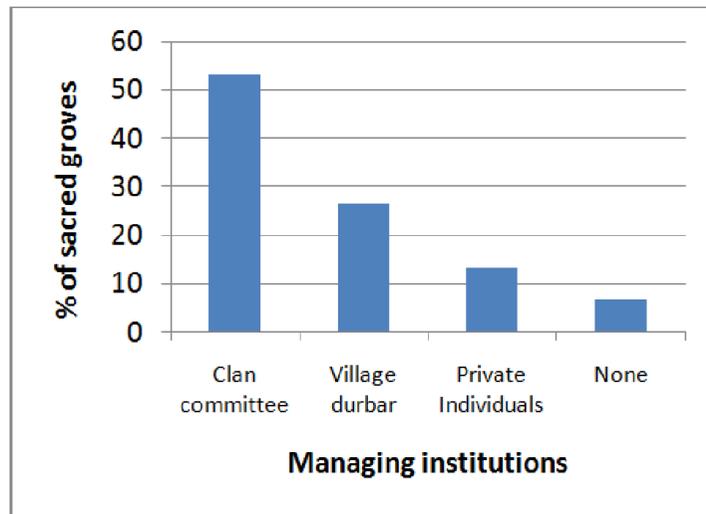


Fig 1: The institutions managing the sacred groves of West Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya

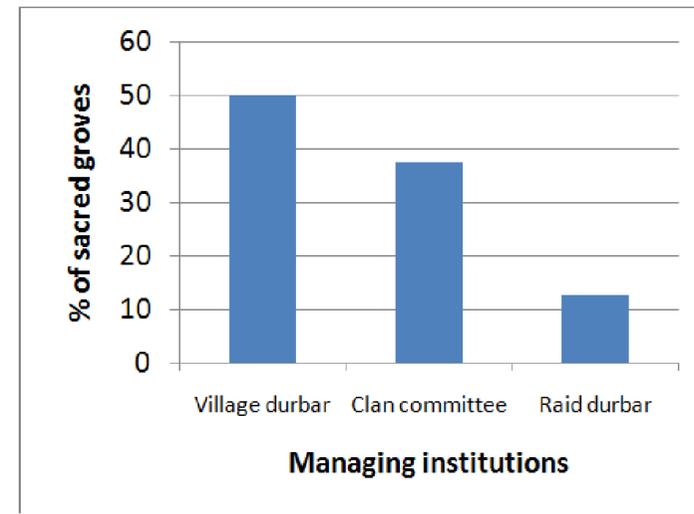


Fig 2: The institutions managing the sacred groves of East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya

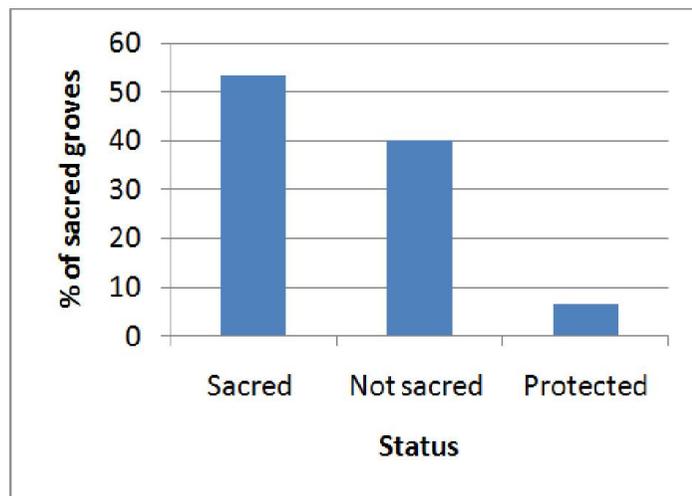


Fig 3: Change in beliefs associated with the sacred grove in the West Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya

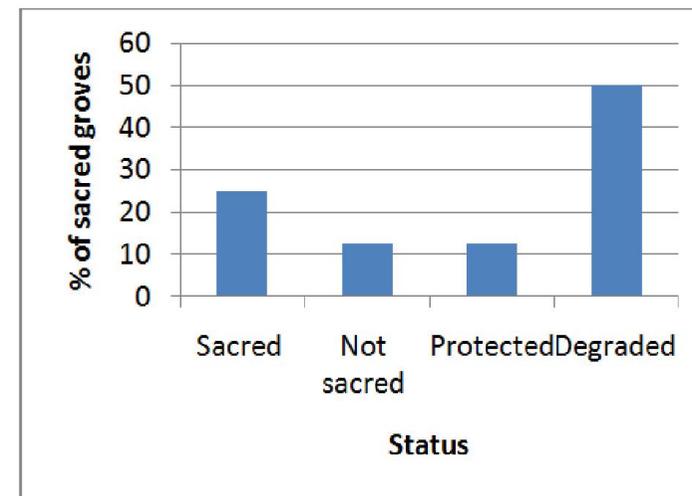


Fig 4: Change in beliefs associated with the sacred groves in the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya

Singh *et al.* (2007) reported few new sacred groves and described a total of 111 sacred groves (as given in details in Table 1). The sacred groves investigated during the study along with their location and status are listed in Tables 3 and 4. The study conducted in the two districts showed that most of the sacred groves were owned, managed and controlled by clans, individuals, village durbar or raid durbar. None of the sacred groves, however, had any influence or interference from the government. The clan owned sacred groves were managed mainly by a committee composed of the clan members which would mostly be the elders. They would have a '*basan*' or an elder who would preside over meetings and make the required decisions. The grove managed by a village durbar involves the village as a whole in the management process. All residents of the village would contribute to cover the expenses incurred for maintaining the grove.

The Decline

There are many reasons attributed to the decline of sacred groves of the state. One of the important but much debated reasons is the change in faith of the people. This mainly refers to the conversion of people from the traditional '*Khasi*' religion to Christianity. One elderly man from Nongstoin in the West Khasi Hills quoted that 'when people started converting to Christianity, they stopped believing in their traditional lifestyle and regarded them as uncivilized which is wrong'. This does not mean that change in faith caused the degradation of the sacred groves but the people themselves developed a wrong notion and connected the culture and tradition with the religion. With no more priests to maintain the grove and perform the rituals, the grove became open to all for extraction and exploitation. Urbanization and modernization is another important cause for the gradual decrease in number and density of sacred groves. Many villagers living near the groves slowly started to lose faith and overcome the fear of the taboos related with the sacred groves. In the beginning, they started collecting small twigs, firewood and tree branches. This gradually led to the collection of bigger logs and, within a short span of time, to the felling of live trees without anyone prohibiting them. In Mawkohmet, the villagers have even set up tea stalls and saw mills inside the grove and the people have completely forgotten about the taboos. In Nonglyngkien, the villagers have already started making houses inside the boundary of the sacred grove and collection of wood and other forest products is done on a daily basis. Another important cause of degradation of sacred groves is the invasion of exotic weeds or species which tend to thrive better and, in due course, eliminate the endemic species leading to the fall of the grove (Pandey, 2010). Cattle grazing is another important cause of degradation of sacred groves especially in West Khasi Hills where cattle farming is still an important source of livelihood.

Perpetuation of Beliefs

Many sacred groves within the past few decades have started completely disappearing from the villages. One very good example is the Law Lyngdoh Ryntathiang sacred grove in Mawkohmet where people have started setting up teashops and saw mills in the sacred grove and there is hardly any patch of good forest left except for a few pine trees and some shrubs. Most rites and ceremonies related with the grove had gradually stopped and were eventually forgotten. The present generations do not exactly know what stories lay behind such sacred groves including their biocultural importance. A survey

conducted in the West Khasi Hills area revealed that almost 70% of the young generation did not even know the location of the 'Law Siarpa', an important sacred grove, in their own area. In Mairang, some people even confuse a community forest with a sacred grove and are not even aware of the fact that five sacred forests are reported from their village of which two are still considered sacred and the remaining are either protected or have been converted into open access forests. These kinds of instances are prevalent in almost all the places where some sacred groves still exist. However, the important thing to be noted is that, even though the sacred groves of Khasi Hills are steadily decreasing in number, the beliefs of the people in such kind of supernatural existence and occurrences still persists. There are quite a number of villages or clans who still perform certain rites and rituals for the groves. In the Law Kyntang at Mawphlang, ceremonies and rituals are still performed (though occasionally) to thank the residing gods for their care and protection. A large section of the village population has converted to Christianity but almost all of them still believe in the sacredness of the grove. Stories are still being transmitted to the younger generation about the origin and importance of the sacred grove. The Law Lyngdoh in Peinlang is one of the sacred groves where performing of rites and ceremonies related to the sacred grove stopped seventy years ago, around the late 1940s. The last priest passed away without passing on the authority over the grove to anyone and other priests are simply scared to take over the responsibility. However, people still regard it as highly sacred; no extraction is allowed and no one dare to collect anything from the grove because of the fear of any mishap or bad luck befalling upon them.

Another example of a once glorious sacred grove is the Law Lyngdoh Nonglait sacred grove in village Lawbyrtun. Covering an area of around 10 ha, the grove was the village's pride. The last ceremony in the grove was performed around sixty years ago and, at present, there is no priest appointed who can take care of the ceremonies and rituals. However, here also, people still strongly believe in the sacredness of the grove though most of them have converted into Christianity. There are many such places where the groves are not sacred anymore in true sense but people still strongly believe in them. Some such examples are: the sacred grove in Mawnai and Mawlong at Mairang, in the West Khasi Hills. This can be attributed mainly to the fact that sacred groves are considered as a gift from their ancestors to them, a kind of remembrance their ancestors had left for the succeeding generations to be constantly reminded about the greatness and sanctity of their race. Sacred groves remind the succeeding generations (who may still belong to the traditional religion or converted to Christianity alike) that their ancestors had a direct way of communicating with God who might have constantly heard their prayers and visited them, in the olden days, through these sacred groves. Sacred groves were considered as a holy place where there was a direct link between god and man. One of the other reasons why sacred groves are still revered is that they have been a great source of livelihood and shelter for generations before and the present generations. People utilize the forest products from sacred groves such as fruits, berries, flowers and even mushrooms and herbs for eating or making medicines. They cannot, however, use them for commercial purposes as it might 'offend' the gods. The '*Khasis*' believe that these sacred groves act as a source of protection to the needy and a source of bread to the poor. In one interview in Mawphlang, a knowledgeable person reported that he had once taken refuge inside the grove when he was being followed in

the night and nothing happened to him. In most cases, it is the belief and faith of the people that strengthens the status and reverence of sacred groves. They also believe that these sacred groves prevent diseases and plagues from entering a particular village and affecting the people. Hence, whenever any person becomes sick, they would firstly go to the grove and pray to the gods for good health and apologize for any misconduct, as was revealed in Phyllud. We noted that ecotourism can be an important and imminent factor for conservation of sacred groves in Meghalaya. Many people believe that sacred groves can act as a theme of attraction to the people from outside. This can not only help in boost the incomre of the village but also tends to make the village famous. The people of Mawphlang follow this policy and it has helped immensely in conservation of the grove.

Conclusion

As in many of the sacred groves in India and the world as a whole, the sacred groves of Meghalaya still need extensive research especially in areas of traditions of conservation and management. The current study suggested that many of the sacred groves of the study area have been greatly degraded. Tiwari *et al.* (1998) had documented a total of 13 sacred groves in the West Khasi Hills. The present study has revealed that, from all the groves visited in this study, only 7 sacred groves still remain or are still considered as sacred in the West Khasi Hills. Also, in comparison to the former study, 8 new sacred groves were documented which had not been documented in the earlier work. Many researchers have reported that the loss of interest of the people and change in faith and modernization are the common causes of degradation of these natural heritages. However, we have found that it is only partly true and does not hold good universally. We also conclude that once the sacred groves are completely obliterated, it will be impossible to revive the age old sacredness and glamour. The government of India has started to pay attention to the reclamation, rehabilitation and conservation of sacred groves. Many researchers and scientists in Meghalaya have also started diverting their attention to the

survey and study of the sacred groves. Much work has been done on the ecology of sacred groves of Mawphlang in the East Khasi Hills and Raliang in Jaintia Hills but a lot needs to be done on the socio-cultural aspects of sacred grove conservation.

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