

## 25. Sacred Groves of Maharashtra: An Inventory

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### ABSTRACT

*We present here an inventory of the sacred groves or devrais of the State of Maharashtra. Detailed information on the location, area and associated deity is available for 233 groves from the districts of Thana, Kolaba, Jalgaon, Pune, Satara, Kolhapur, Yewatmal, Bhandara and Chandrapur. Gross information on hectarage per taluka is available for the district of Ratnagiri. The total area thus reported comes to 3,570 hectares. It is estimated that when more complete information becomes available, the total area under sacred groves will be at least 5,000 and perhaps as much as 10,000 hectares or more. These sacred groves are the only remnants of the original forest maintained in near climax condition in many parts of Maharashtra. As such, these groves are now serving a vital role in the preservation of plant species diversity and every attempt should be made to fully protect them as a part of a system of nature preserves.*

### Introduction

India is a land of contradictions. It is at once a country with the strongest traditions of nature conservation anywhere in the world, and a country which has suffered an almost unparalleled devastation of its natural vegetation and animal life. It is a fact little realised that much of what remains of our rich biological heritage has been preserved through the ages because of a wealth of conservation-oriented cultural and religious traditions. We

owe our primate populations to the faith in Lord Hanuman, and the few trees left in the midst of our urban concrete jungles are the sacred *peepal* trees. While a realisation of the tragic extermination of much of our wild life has created a new awareness of nature conservation in our urban middle classes, the traditional base for nature conservation is being rapidly eroded. The damage being caused by this erosion of traditional modes of nature conservation is very grave and there is a pressing necessity for us to incorporate the traditional beliefs in a new enlightened approach to nature conservation.

One such significant tradition of nature conservation is that of dedicating patches of forests to some deity as sacred groves (Gadgil and Vartak, 1975, 1976). Such sacred groves distributed over most parts of India have played an important role in the preservation of vegetation in its near-virgin condition over the centuries. In many parts of India they today represent the only surviving examples of climax vegetation. Tragically, many of these groves are disappearing under the influence of modernisation. It is imperative that we locate them and incorporate them in a well thought out plan of the conservation of our plant wealth before it is too late. This paper, which presents an inventory of the sacred groves from the State of Maharashtra, is an attempt to prepare the basic documentation which is a prerequisite of an effort at their long-term conservation.

### **The phenomenon**

A sacred grove is a patch of vegetation, ranging in extent from a few trees to forty hectares or more which is left undisturbed because of its association with some deity. In its original form this protection forbade any interference with the biota of the grove whatever, and not even leaf litter was removed from it, nor was grazing or any hunting permitted within the grove. Even when the protection has become less stringent, any removal of live wood continues to be taboo. These groves therefore represent a sample of the vegetation in its climax state.

The religious belief associated with the groves seem to relate to primitive cults, probably dating from the hunting gathering stage. The deity is generally a mother-goddess, though it may also take the form of phallic worship. The deities are fiery spirits apt to cause serious harm to whoever offends them. Since

any disturbance to the grove was considered an offense to the deity, the groves were traditionally free of all human interference.

The groves probably originally served to furnish the proper atmosphere for primitive cult rites. They may also have originated to protect some particularly rare species which had a function, for example, as a medicinal plant. Today, being the only remnants of tree vegetation in many parts of the country, they are serving other critical functions as the only sources of leaf litter for the fields, or in the protection of water sources.

Apart from such value to local inhabitants, these sacred groves are now playing the role of reservoirs of biological diversity. It is well known that the climax forests tend to be far richer in number of plant species than other stages of succession. As few of the remaining examples of climax vegetation, the sacred groves often contain many plant species otherwise totally absent from the region. It is important for us to preserve this diversity for posterity, not only for compelling scientific and aesthetic reasons, but also for sound economic reasons as potential sources of significant chemicals as yet undiscovered, or as carriers of potentially valuable genetic traits for the future tree-breeding programmes and so on.

### The inventory

We ourselves became interested in this phenomenon during our field work on the Western Ghats in Maharashtra in 1972-73, when we found these groves to be the only remaining patches of greenery over vast stretches of otherwise devastated countryside. The Maharashtra State Forest Department helped us generously in our own field work, and, in addition, agreed to request its own staff to collect and send us the available information on sacred groves, particularly those under the control of the forest department. We have by now accumulated such information on 233 groves in Maharashtra. The information is still rather incomplete, and groves under private control are particularly likely to have been missed. Nevertheless, this information presents a good picture of the location and extent of these groves in many parts of Maharashtra (Fig. 25.1 and Appendix I).

The purpose of this paper is to present this inventory, in the form of two appendices. Appendix I lists the details of 233 individual groves about which we have definite information. As

will be seen, these groves are distributed over most of the forested tracts of Maharashtra on the Western Ghats as well as in the Vidarbha region. They represent a variety of vegetation types from semi-evergreen to dry deciduous corresponding to climatic regimes from annual rainfalls of 5000 mm on the Mahabaleshwar plateau to 500 mm in Jalgaon district. In size they range from a clump of a few trees to 60 hectares, though the majority are fairly small, the median being only about 1.5 hectares (see Table 1). The total area of these sacred groves comes to 1000 hectares. Appendix II lists only the area of land under sacred groves in each taluk of Ratnagiri district. The total area here comes to 2568 hectares. Thus the overall total area of the documented sacred groves of Maharashtra is 3570 hectares. In view of the fact that the sacred groves are apparently distributed in all regions of the State, whereas our information is till now restricted to a portion of the State, it is likely that the total area under sacred groves in Maharashtra is at least 5,000 hectares and perhaps as much as 10,000 hectares or more. Representing all the various vegetation types of the State, these forests in their near-climax condition, represent a unique biological heritage.

#### The future

It is imperative that we make serious attempts for the continued preservation of these sacred groves as a part of our programme of conservation of biological diversity. For these groves are fast disappearing either because the villagers themselves lose faith in the tradition, or because the forest departments which may take them over, start their immediate exploitation. In our earlier accounts of sacred groves we have documented how this has happened with reference to specific groves in Maharashtra (Gadgil and Vartak 1975). Subsequent to this account, the Karnataka Forest Department has taken over the sacred groves or *devarkadus* of Coorg District and has immediately prepared plans for their exploitation. With so little of our natural vegetation remaining in its climax condition, this is a most regrettable step. For even if the forest department exploits the sacred groves with care and moderation, once the taboo is broken by them, poaching of wood by villagers will start immediately and very quickly lead to the degradation of these last

refuges of our natural vegetation to the same level as the rest of our countryside.

It is therefore imperative that we bring together all the sacred groves of India under a single ownership of the forest departments of the various states, and then constitute them into a system of countrywide nature preserves. In the meanwhile, before this is accomplished, some groves will remain in private hands as temple trusts. These could be protected through the intervention of charity commissioners who could view the groves as a heritage of the temple trusts that must be protected. A very good precedent for this exists in the case of a grove near Alibag in Maharashtra. We therefore renew our plea to the authorities of forest departments, Indian Board for Wild Life, National Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination and the Charity Commissioners to take active steps towards the future conservation of these sacred groves.

#### Acknowledgement

We are grateful to the authorities of the Maharashtra State Forest Department for their help in compilation of this inventory. We would particularly like to mention Shri V.D. Mehendale, formerly Additional Chief Conservator of Forests for Maharashtra, without whose interest this project could not have been pursued. We are thankful to all the other departmental officials and field staff for their willing help. We also wish to acknowledge the encouragement and facilities provided by Dr. G.B. Deodikar, Director of Maharashtra Association for Cultivation of Science.

#### REFERENCES

- Gadgil Madhav and V.D. Vartak (1975), Sacred groves of India—a plea for continued conservation, *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 73: 623-647.
- Gadgil Madhav and V.D. Vartak (1976), Sacred groves of the Western Ghats in India, *Economic Botany*, 30: 152-160.

Table 25.1. The size distribution of sacred groves of Maharashtra  
(Mean is 4.93 hectares, Median is 1.5 hectares)

Area in hectares	Less than 2	2-5	5-10	10-15	15-20	20-30	30-50	More than 50
Numbers in the category	111	11	16	8	9	1	8	2

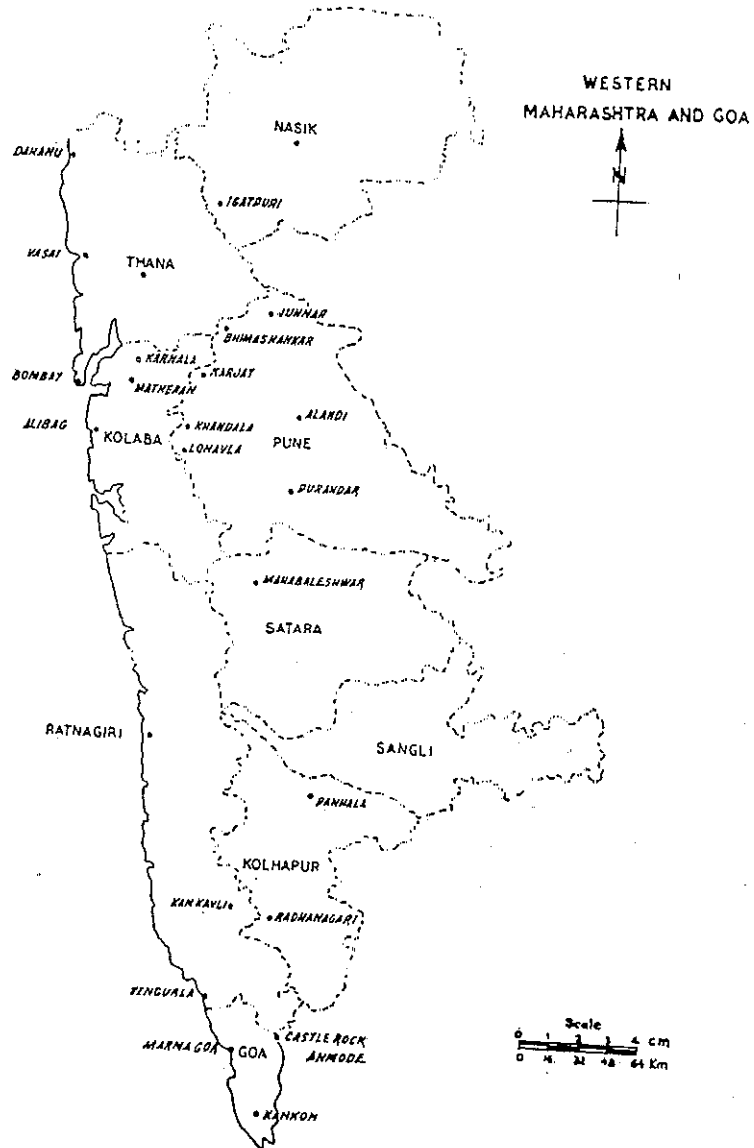


Fig. 25.1.

SACRED GROVES OF MAHARASHTRA: AN INVENTORY

APPENDIX I: An inventory of sacred groves of Maharashtra

<i>District</i>	<i>Taluka</i>	<i>Nearest village</i>	<i>Area in hectares</i>	<i>Deity</i>
Thana	Dahanu	Saiwan	4-8	Chambhargad
Thana	Dahanu	Ashagad	2-4	Santoshimata
Thana	—	Kanchad	11.16	Shri Gramdevi Kanchad
Thana	—	Suponda	2.15	Shri Gramdevi Suponda
Thana	—	Sange	37.6	Shri Tryambakeshwar
Thana	—	Gorhe	9.86	Shri Ram
Thana	—	Gorhe	30.45	Shri Laxminarayan
Thana	—	Gorhe	8.33	Hazrat Parishaha
Thana	—	Shelte	34.22	Shri Gramdevi
Thana	—	Nane	6.0	Shri Sidheshwar
Thana	—	Galtare	4.52	Shri Gramdevi
Thana	—	Pali	3.0	Shri Gramdevi
Thana	—	Gourapur	43.7	Maruti
Thana	—	Ambiste Bu.	60.5	Nagnath
Thana	—	Ambiste Bu.	4.25	Pir
Thana	—	Ambiste Bu.	44.4	Nagnath
Thana	—	Khanivali	4.9	Pirumbaba
Thana	—	Gunj	22.36	Bharagavnath
Thana	—	Gunj	18.87	Vijreshweri
Thana	—	Biloshi	0.85	Pir
Thana	—	Ghonsai	1.32	Gramdevi
Kolaba	Mangaon	Vile	1.01	Bapuji
Kolaba	Mahad	Pangari	5.10	Morawana
Kolaba	Mahad	Panguri	7.829	—

1	2	3	4	5
Kolaba	—	Gani	11.583	Kalkai
Kolaba	—	Deodhar	33.69	—
Kolaba	—	Chirgaon	32.182	—
Kolaba	—	Bhabat	11.331	—
Kolaba	—	Varvatne	16.389	Bhairidevi
Kolaba	Dehan	Dehan	17.603	Dehen
Kolaba	—	Dehan	30.077	Dehen
Kolaba	—	Mangloji	18.716	Kalkai
Kolaba	—	Toradi	7.637	Toradi
Kolaba	—	Adi	17.249	Toradi
Kolaba	—	Kole	17.592	Kole
Jalgaon	—	Taiwade	14.325	Taiwadi
Jalgaon	Yawal	Savhkeda	2.0	Nagdevi
Jalgaon	Tawal	Kingaon	2.0	Manubai
Jalgaon	Chopda	Adawad	2.0	Ram, Mahadev Hanuman
Pune	Chopda	Chopda-Lasur	2.0	Nateshwar
Pune	Muisi	Sandavghar	0.4	—
Pune	-do-	Sandavghar	0.8	Kalkaidevi
Pune	-do-	Dhamanohoi	0.4	—
Pune	-do-	Chikhalgaon	0.8	—
Pune	-do-	Ambegaon	0.8	—
Pune	-do-	Velane	0.5	Waghjai
Pune	-do-	Velane	0.4	Waghjai
Pune	-do-	Wadwathar	0.4	Waghjai
Pune	-do-	Nandivali	0.2	Waghjai
Pune	-do-	Shirawali	0.2	Dorjai



Pune	Mulsi	Sambeve	Waghjai	0.2	Waghjai
Pune	-do-	Badhe	Waghjai	—	Waghjai
Pune	-do-	Chikhalgaon	Waghjai	1	Waghjai
Pune	-do-	Kule	Waghjai	0.2	Waghjai
Pune	-do-	Nanegaon	Waghjai	2	Waghjai
Pune	-do-	Dongargaon	Bhairinath	0.8	Bhairinath
Pune	-do-	Walen	Waghjai	0.2	Waghjai
Pune	-do-	Khamboli	Waghjai	0.2	Waghjai
Pune	-do-	Khamboli	Karanjubai	0.2	Karanjubai
Pune	-do-	Andhale	Umbrai	0.8	Umbrai
Pune	-do-	Bhadaskhonda	Waghoba	0.4	Waghoba
Pune	-do-	Bhadaskhonda	Waghjai	0.2	Waghjai
Pune	-do-	Yaduste	Ratnai	0.4	Ratnai
Pune	-do-	Avalas	Dongarai	0.1	Dongarai
Pune	-do-	Adgaon	Chowdai	0.2	Chowdai
Pune	-do-	Palase	Kalkai	0.5	Kalkai
Pune	—	Nasrapur	Baneshwar	7.00	Baneshwar
Pune	—	Bibi	Shambhu	54.5	Shambhu
Pune	—	Sonvadi	Somyai	3.0	Somyai
Pune	—	Karla	—	3.4	—
Pune	—	Kune	—	3.0	—
Pune	—	Vanjali	Kalubai	0.16	Kalubai
Pune	Velhe	—	—	—	—
Pune	Velhe	Kolambi	Bhiroba	6.17	Bhiroba
Pune	Velhe	Gavandhe	Bhairi	0.04	Bhairi
Pune	Velhe	Gavandhe	—	0.36	—
Pune	Velhe	Ghisar	Kalubai Jugai	3.15	Kalubai Jugai
Pune	Velhe	Ambegaon	Jogoba	0.11	Jogoba

1	2	3	4	5
Pune	Velhe	Givashi	0.20	Mahadev
Pune	Velhe	Shirkoli	0.05	Mhasoba
Pune	Velhe	Shirkoli	0.19	Buchoba
Pune	Velhe	Shirkoli	0.49	Mhosoba
Pune	Velhe	Shirkoli	0.01	Mahadev
Pune	Velhe	Shirkoli	3.42	Shirkai
Pune	Bhor	Nasrapur	1.42	Shikhai
Pune	Bhor	Jaitpad	1.09	—
Pune	Bhor	Jaitpad	0.26	Waghdevi
Pune	Bhor	Jaitpad	3.08	Durgadevi
Pune	Bhor	Hirdoshi	0.04	Somjai
Pune	Bhor	Kondhari	2.00	Dev
Pune	Bhor	Warvand	10.35	—
Pune	Bhor	Pahrar	10.35	Sowjaidev
Pune	Bhor	Karungan	1.71	Janani
Pune	Bhor	Kudli	0.52	Janani
Pune	Bhor	Umbarde	0.84	Janani
Pune	Velhe	Thangaon	0.30	Kiroba
Pune	Velhe	Pole	0.75	Somajai
Pune	Velhe	Mangaon	13.80	Jance
Pune	Velhe	Dapsare	0.65	Jarvit-Shambhu
Pune	Velhe	Ghol	2.75	Vardani
Pune	Velhe	Khanu	1.14	Bhiroba
Pune	Velhe	Bopaighar	1.36	Kalkai
Pune	Velhe	Vanjale	0.40	Malaidevi
Pune	Velhe	Margasani	0.99	Malaidevi

Pune	Velhe	Paikhurd	4.35	Bapujibua
Pune	Velhe	Khambavdi	—	Kalubai
Pune	Velhe	Kolavli	—	Gengjai
Pune	Velhe	Kille Rajgad	—	Padmavati
Pune	Velhe	Gunjavne	—	Varadani
Pune	Velhe	Gunjavne	—	Ugjai
Satara	Mahabateshwar	Hatlot	0.7	Mahadev
Satara	-do-	Molleshwar	1.5	Molleshwar
Satara	-do-	Parut	1.0	—
Satara	-do-	Amboode	9.0	Mandhardevi
Satara	Javali	Kas	0.3	Kasai
Satara	Javali	Phalani	0.4	Janai
Satara	Javali	Andhari	0.6	Kasai
Satara	Javali	Munavale	1.2	Umbarjodevi
Satara	Satara	Ghatwan	1.2	Ghatai
Satara	Patan	Chinchewadi	0.2	Wakeshwar
Satara	Patan	Bandhwat	0.4	Bhairoba
Satara	Patan	Jatav	1	Jyotiba
Satara	Patan	Dusale	0.8	Janai
Satara	Patan	Sadswaghapur	1.6	Mauli
Satara	Patan	Irewadi	0.2	Bhairoba
Satara	Patan	Nivakune	1	Janai
Satara	Chandgad	Kasagade	6.0	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Parle	2.0	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Bhogoli	20.0	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Sule	6.0	—
Kolhapur	Ajra	Parpoli	2.0	Ramling
Kolhapur	Matkapur	Amba	2.8	Ambeshwar

1	2	3	4	5
Kolhapur	Malkapur	Javati	4.0	Italai
Kolhapur	-do-	Kasarde	12.0	Dhopeswar
Kolhapur	-do-	Udgiri	1.7	Kalammadevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Nivale	1.3	Kalamma
Kolhapur	-do-	Tanali	0.5	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Kandvan	0.5	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Chandel	0.5	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Dhakale	0.5	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Malewadi	0.5	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Wirle	0.5	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Jampur	0.5	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Malgaon	0.5	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Palaswade	0.5	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Gajapur	0.8	Vittalaidevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Gajapur	0.8	Sukaidevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Galvade	8.0	Kedarling
Kolhapur	-do-	Shembvane	0.3	Navalaidevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Shembvane	0.8	Rasaidevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Gravadi	2.4	Ugaidevi
Kolhapur	Gargoti	Pal	4.0	Mahadev
Kolhapur	-do-	Shivdav	1.6	—
Kolhapur	-do-	Shivdav	0.4	Mahardeity
Kolhapur	Gargoti	Antuli	0.6	Ling
Kolhapur	-do-	Tambechiwadi	1.2	Sateri
Kolhapur	-do-	Hanumante	0.8	Hanumant
Kolhapur	-do-	Patgaon	1.2	Ling

Kolhapur	-do-	Patgaon	1.2	Shambhu
Kolhapur	-do-	Mani	1.2	Mulkeshwar
Kolhapur	-do-	Manope	0.8	Ling
Kolhapur	-do-	Majgaon	1.6	Mahadev
Kolhapur	-do-	Pathe	1.2	Sateri
Kolhapur	Kolhapur	Girgaon	1.0	Katyayani
Kolhapur	-do-	Wadi-Ratnagiri	1.0	Jotiba
Kolhapur	Radhanagari	Asangaon	2.0	Lingdev-virdev
Kolhapur	-do-	Patpanahata	4.8	Lingdev
Kolhapur	-do-	Bhandane	2.8	Patnadevi-Lingdev
Kolhapur	-do-	Parale	0.4	Dongradev
Kolhapur	-do-	Aini	0.4	Lingdev
Kolhapur	-do-	Aini	1.0	Bhairi
Kolhapur	-do-	Savarde	6.65	Ramalingdev
Kolhapur	-do-	Bambrachiwadi	8.36	Pavdoba
Kolhapur	-do-	Baki	1.0	Baknath
Kolhapur	-do-	Bambarde	1.2	Ramling
Kolhapur	-do-	Bambarde	0.4	Bandbirdev
Kolhapur	-do-	Padisali	1.2	Jugardev
Kolhapur	-do-	Padli	1.2	Rasaidevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Asane	2.8	Gangobadev
Kolhapur	-do-	Asane	0.8	Maidev
Kolhapur	-do-	Majivade	0.4	Garadidev
Kolhapur	-do-	Nanibale	3.2	Gangobadingdev
Kolhapur	-do-	Kambarde	2.4	Hanuman
Kolhapur	Gaganbawda	Kandalgaon	2.0	Lingdev
Kolhapur	-do-	Manvet	2.0	Rasaidevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Taliye	2.0	Shanidev

1	2	3	4	5
Kolhapur	-do-	Naraveli	2.0	Gangoba
Kolhapur	-do-	Saitvade	2.0	Shridev
Kolhapur	-do-	Vesaran	2.0	Rasaidevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Asalaj	2.0	Rasaidevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Garivade	2.0	Kedarling
Kolhapur	-do-	Jargi	2.0	Jyotirling
Kolhapur	-do-	Palasambe	2.0	Gangoba
Kolhapur	-do-	Karai	2.0	Kedarling
Kolhapur	-do-	Sonoli	3.2	Pavanadevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Virvadesoundal	5.1	Gangodev
Kolhapur	-do-	Kotepe	2.0	Gangodev
Kolhapur	-do-	Sangashi	0.8	Shrisangai
Kolhapur	-do-	Setoshi	1.0	Jyotirling
Kolhapur	-do-	Khokurle	1.0	Jyotirling
Kolhapur	-do-	Talye	1.0	Kalbadevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Talye	1.0	Gangoba
Kolhapur	-do-	Kode-Bu	1.0	Shankaroba
Kolhapur	-do-	Kodekhurd	1.0	Bahirath-Thakaroba
Kolhapur	-do-	Het	1.0	Kedarling
Kolhapur	-do-	Uple	1.0	Sidheshwar
Kolhapur	Gaganbawda	Mangwali	1.0	Kharnath
Kolhapur	-do-	Mangwali	1.0	Gangeshwar
Kolhapur	-do-	Jambhwade	1.0	Laxmibai
Kolhapur	-do-	Bhom	1.1	Gango
Kolhapur	-do-	Asavane	1.0	Dhakubai
Kolhapur	-do-	Ainari	1.0	Rasai

1	2	3	4	5
Kolhapur	-do-	Tirwadi-Khaarepatan	1.0	Dev Gangoba
Kolhapur	-do-	Vengsar	1.25	Kalechhari
Kolhapur	-do-	Vengsar	1.0	Maharparul
Kolhapur	-do-	Nimarule	1.0	Borchabai
Kolhapur	-do-	Tithwali	1.0	Dirvyadevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Kusur	1.0	Gango
Kolhapur	-do-	Kusur	1.0	Pavanabai
Kolhapur	-do-	Kurli	1.25	Kuriadevi
Kolhapur	-do-	Achirne	1.0	Devrasai
Kolhapur	-do-	Gadgad	1.0	Gango
Kolhapur	-do-	Gadgad	1.0	Vaijanath
Yeotmal	—	Pabhal	—	Bajarangbali Temple
Yeotmal	Darwaha	Bharsara	0.1	-do-
Yeotmal	Wani	Khansad-gaon	19.8	Pharsopen
Bhandara	—	Kalimati	0.5	—
Bhandara	—	Vandhra	0.20	Ram
Bhandara	—	Pongezara	1.0	Shiva
Chandrapur	—	Alampalli	1.0	Maruthi
-do-	Chanda	Sondo	—	Sidheshwar
-do-	-do-	Antargaon	—	Kondai
-do-	-do-	Bhimkund	2.0	Bhim

## APPENDIX—II: Area under sacred groves in different talukas of Ratnagiri District

<i>Taluka</i>	<i>Area in hectares</i>
Mandangad	199.43
Dapoli	50.03
Khed	174.55
Chiplun	187.07
Guhagar	61.41
Deorukh	349.54
Ratnagiri	541.40
Lanja	235.55
Rajapur	260.34
Deogad	69.20
Kankawali	102.70
Malwan	62.84
Vengurla	8.67
Sawantwadi	117.47
Kudal	148.24
Total	2568.44