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"The Cultural Politics of Sacred Groves: A Case Study of *Devithans* in Sikkim, India"

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Sacred groves are areas that are conserved by communities for spiritual or cultural beliefs. They often have associated limitations on activities within the forest. India is believed to have the highest concentration of sacred groves in the world. However, in our research of *devithans*—Nepali sacred groves—in the eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim, India, we reveal that their very existence in India has long remained unacknowledged in sacred natural site research. By researching the proliferation of *devithans* in the village of Biring, East Sikkim, we not only foreground their existence, but also unpack their cultural politics to reveal the contestations and appropriations around the symbolic value of sacred sites. Given that historically the Buddhist Lepcha-Bhutias' cultural association with Sikkim's sacred landscape has been celebrated, while that of Nepali ethnic groups has been largely invisibilised, we argue that *devithans* have emerged as a potential political instrument for the latter to validate political and cultural claims to Sikkim's sacred landscape. The predominant tone in sacred grove scholarship in India has largely been anchored in the language of ecology, and tends to understand sacred groves as communal sites without exploring the associated constitutive politics. By using a cultural politics lens to understand *devithans*, this research expands beyond simplistic narratives to focus on present day cultural politics that are internal to communities that often not only sustain groves, but also help them to proliferate. (Text from authors' abstract)

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