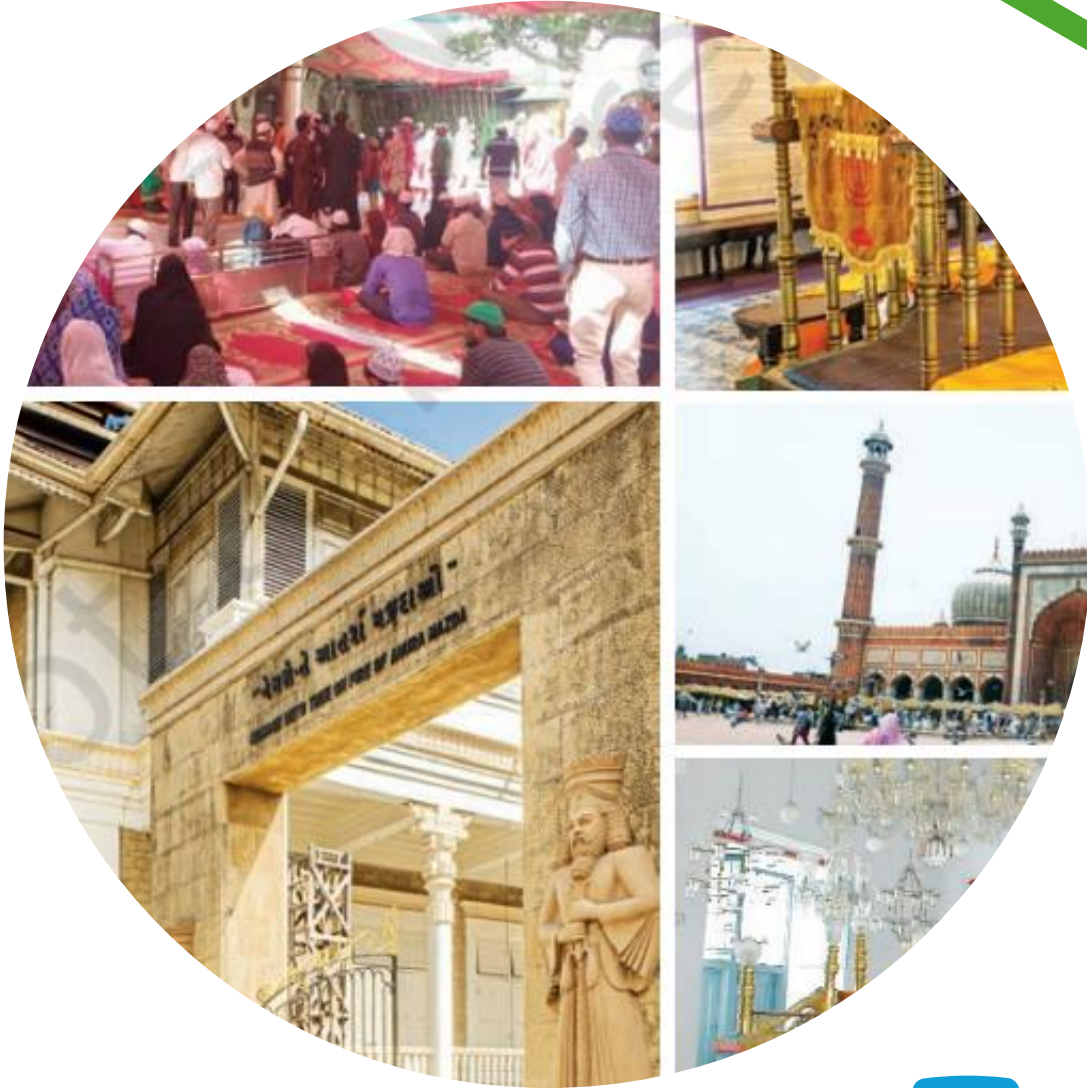


Chapter 8

How the Land Becomes Sacred

Class VII
Social Science



The Big Questions?

What is 'sacredness'?

How does the land become sacred?

How do sacred sites and pilgrimage networks connect with the life and culture of the people?

What role did sacred geography play in the cultural integration of the Indian Subcontinent?

Meaning of 'Sacredness'

- Refers to something of deep religious or spiritual significance.
- Considered worthy of **respect, reverence, and devotion**.
- Often seen as **holy or divine**.
- Can be a **special location or shrine** that inspires deep emotions or spiritual thoughts.
- May also refer to a **pilgrimage journey, the route taken, or the land traversed**.



Sacred Places of Religions Originating Outside India



- The places in these pictures are revered by followers of **Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism**.
- These religions **originated outside India**.
- People visit these places for **prayer and worship**.
- **Others, regardless of faith**, also visit these shrines (e.g., Ajmer Dargah, Velankanni Church).
- **Pilgrimages** to these places often occur on **special religious occasions**.

Sacred Sites of Religions Originating in India – Buddhism

Religions born in India have **many more sacred sites**.

In **Buddhism**, sacred places are often where:

The **Buddha** visited, or

His **relics** are kept.

Examples:

Great Stūpa at Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh) – a relic stūpa.

Mahabodhi Stūpa in Bodh Gaya (Bihar) – where Buddha attained enlightenment.

These are **important pilgrimage sites**.

Bodh Gaya receives over **four million visitors** annually.

Sacred Sites in Sikhism

- **Takhts** are **centres of spiritual authority** in Sikhism.
- Key Takhts include:
 - **Takht Sri Patna Sahib** (Patna)
 - **Akal Takht** (part of the **Golden Temple**, Amritsar)
 - **Takht Sri Keshgarh Sahib** (Anandpur)
- Sikhs **aspire to visit these pilgrimage sites** at least once in their lifetime.
- These sites are linked to **important Sikh Gurus** and hold **special religious significance**.
- **Guru Nanak** and other Gurus undertook pilgrimages to many places, including:
 - **Haridwar, Prayag, Mathura, Varanasi, Ayodhya, Puri**, and even **some Muslim shrines**.



India as a Land of Pilgrimages

Pilgrimage sites exist
across India, from
Himalayas to
Kanyakumari.



Reflects **unity of**
country and culture.



People travel **north to**
south and vice versa.

Pilgrimages in India

Tīrthayātrā = pilgrimage to **sacred sites (tīrthas)**.

Seen as both a **physical and spiritual journey**.

Follows a **specific code of conduct**.

Practised for over **3,000 years**, even without modern transport.

Result: **Entire Indian geography** came to be seen as **sacred**.

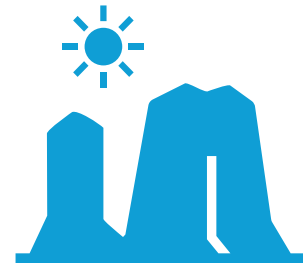
Sacred Sites in Jainism



Tirthas linked to **Tirthankaras'** liberation or key life events.



Natural sites like trees, ponds, hills also sacred.



Examples: **Mount Abu, Girnar, Śhatruñjaya hill** (Gujarat).



Sabarimala Pilgrimage

- Dedicated to deity **Ayyappa** (Kerala)
- Attracts **10+ million pilgrims annually**
- Trek through **hills and forests**
- Journey symbolizes **spiritual challenges**
- **Natural landmarks** along the route are sacred

More sacred sites



MORE SACRED SITES IN
HINDUISM AND FOLK
BELIEFS



NATURE ELEMENTS LIKE
**MOUNTAINS, RIVERS,
TREES, ANIMALS,
STONES** ARE SACRED.



MANY **GEOGRAPHICAL
FEATURES** ARE
WORSHIPPED AS **DIVINE**.



RIVERS OFTEN
CONSIDERED **DEVĪS
(GODDESSES)**.



CERTAIN **TREES, PLANTS,
AND ANIMALS** HOLD
SPECIAL HOLINESS.



FOLK AND TRIBAL
BELIEFS ALSO HONOR
NATURAL ELEMENTS AS
SACRED.



Sacred Geography of India

**Pilgrimage
networks** span
across India, forming
a **sacred geography**.

As a result, the **land
itself is seen as
sacred**.

Story of the 51 Shakti Pīṭhas

Shakti
(**Satī**) immolated
herself after being
insulted by her father.

Śhiva, in grief and
anger, carried her body
and refused
cremation.

Viṣṇu used
his **chakra** to cut the
body into pieces.

Each place where a
body part fell became
a **Shakti Pīṭha**.

These sites are
now **sacred**
shrines across India,
Bangladesh, and
Pakistan.

Symbolizes how **divine**
presence sanctifies
the land.

Pilgrimage and Cultural Unity

Pilgrims **travel across India** to visit sacred sites.

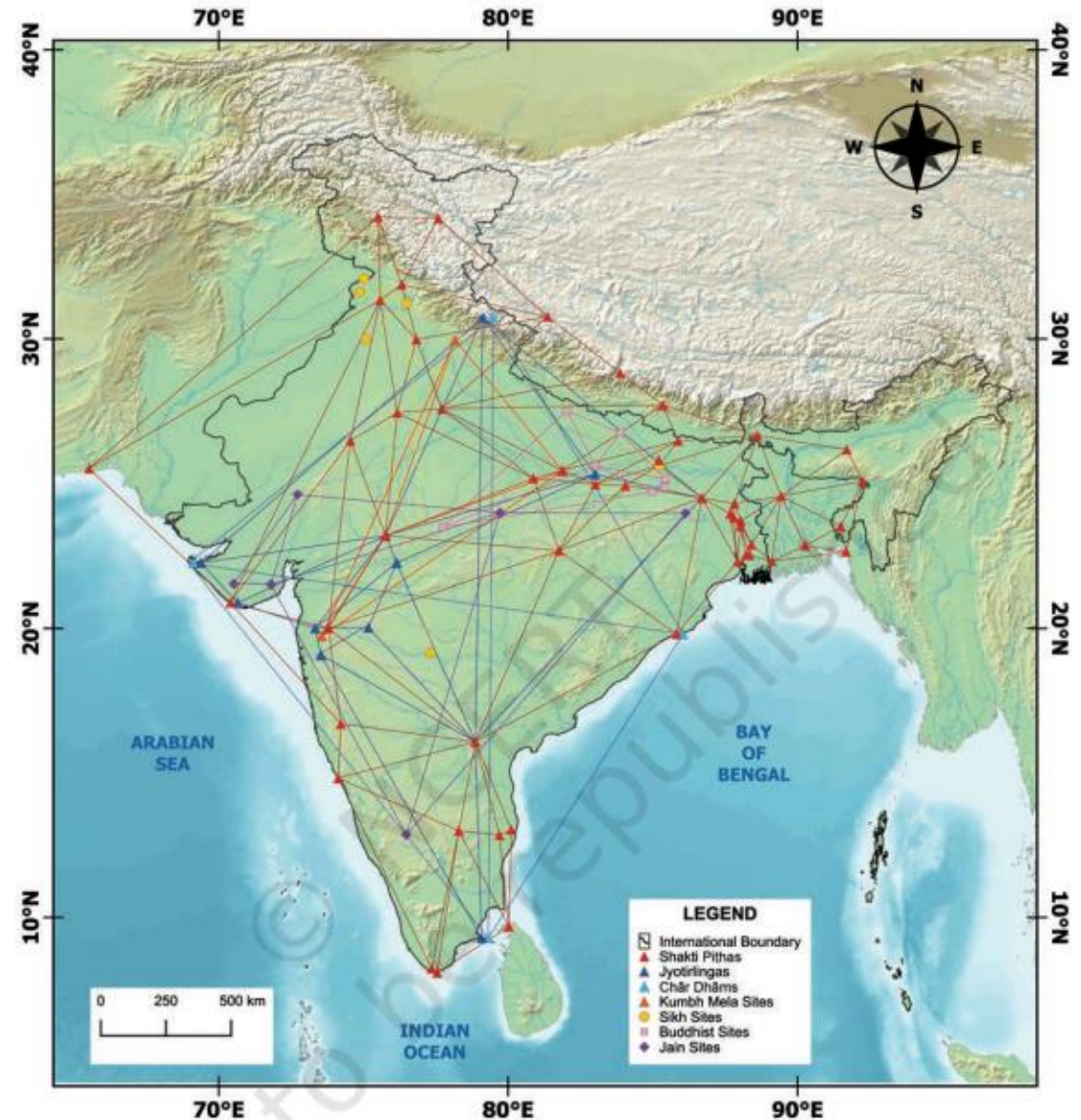
Along the way, they encounter **diverse**:

- **Languages**
- **Customs**
- **Clothing**
- **Food**

Despite differences, they also observe **shared traditions and values**.

Pilgrimage fosters a sense of **unity in diversity**.

A map showing
a few networks
of traditional
tīrthas.



Why Did People Travel Long Distances?

Religious reasons –
pilgrimages to sacred
sites

**Merchants and
traders – to exchange
goods**

**Scholars and seekers
– to debate, learn, and
teach**

Different travelers'
**routes often
overlapped**

Led to:

- **Sharing of ideas, stories,
and cultures**
- **Adaptation of old ideas
and birth of new ones**

**This enriched cultural
life and promoted
integration of the
Indian Subcontinent**

Sacred Ecology

Tirthas often located near **rivers, lakes, forests, or mountains**

Natural landscapes are seen as **sacred spaces (puṇyakṣhetras)**

This view promotes **respect and protection of Nature**

Reflects the idea that **humans are part of Nature, not separate**

Geography, culture, and spirituality are deeply interconnected in these sacred spaces

Rivers and Sangams (Confluences)

Rivers worshipped in India since **Vedic times**

Nadīstuti Sūkta (Rigveda) praises **19 ancient rivers**

Common ritual verse invokes major rivers:

Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu, Kaveri

Rivers seen as **civilizational lifelines**

Sources, tributaries, and riverbanks considered sacred

Pilgrims visit **sacred river sites and sangams**

Rivers addressed with reverence (e.g., **Ganga ji, Yamuna ji**)



Kumbh Mela

- Originates from the **legend of Amṛita Manthana**
- **Devas and Asuras** churned the ocean for **amṛita** (nectar of immortality)
- **Viṣṇu**, as **Mohini**, took the **kumbha** (pitcher) to protect it from the asuras
- Drops of amṛita fell at **four places**:
 - **Haridwar, Prayagraj, Nashik, Ujjain**
- These sites host the **Kumbh Mela**
- A **ritual dip** in the river at these locations is considered **highly auspicious**

Mountains and Forests as Sacred Spaces



Mountains often linked to **deities, legends, and heroes**



Symbolize a **gateway from earth to heaven**



Many **tīrthas and temples** built on **hilltops**



Climbing symbolizes a **spiritual journey toward the divine**



Pilgrims once took **challenging mountain trails**, testing body and mind



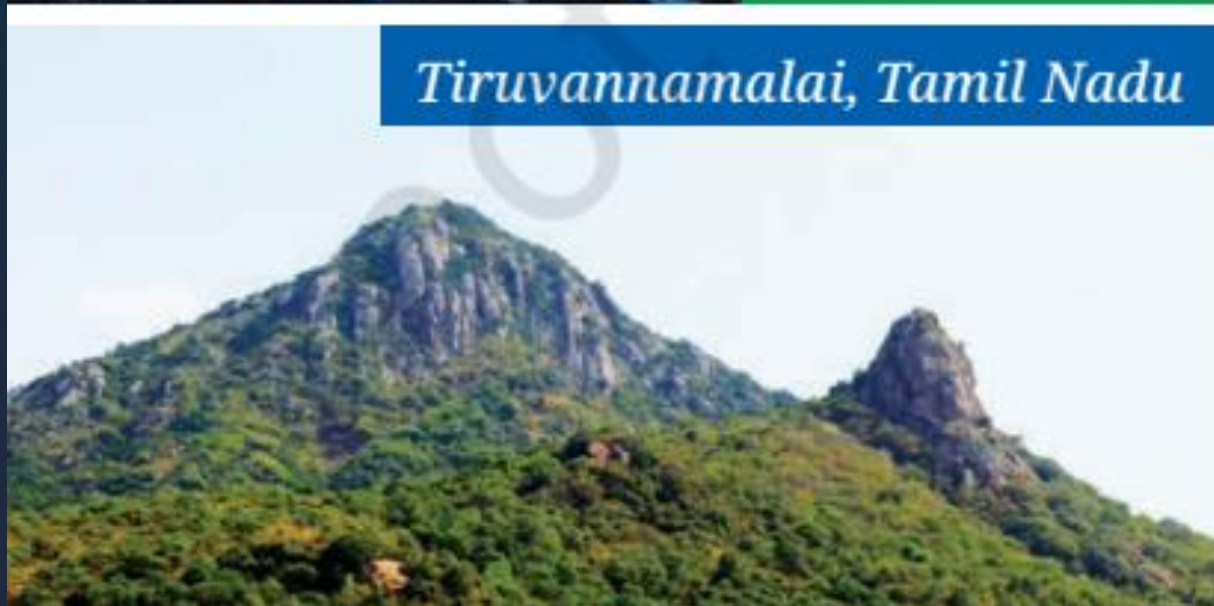
Today, many sites are more **easily accessible** via modern transport.



Mount Kailash



Vaishno Devi Temple, Katra

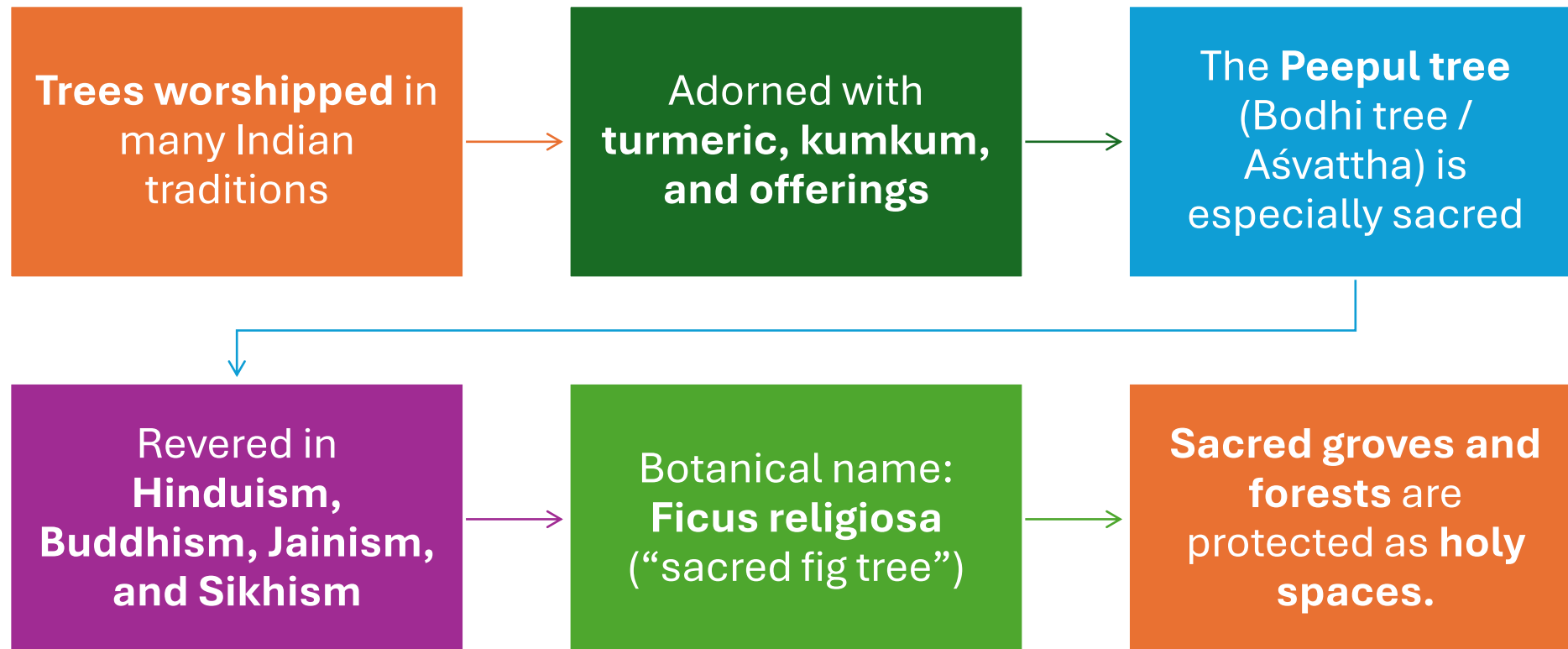


Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu



Lord Balaji, Tirumala hills

Trees, Forests, and Sacred Groves



The Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya



- Located at the **Mahabodhi Temple, Bodh Gaya (Bihar)**
- Believed to be a **direct descendant** of the **original Bodhi tree**
- Under this tree, **Buddha attained enlightenment** (as per Buddhist tradition)
- Gives the names:
 - **‘Bodhi tree’** – Tree of Enlightenment
 - **‘Bodh Gaya’** – Place of Enlightenment

Epics and Sacred Geography



Mahābhārata and **Rāmāyaṇa** describe pilgrimages, sacred places, and natural sites



Mention of **rivers, forests, and mountains** as sacred



Local legends across India claim epic heroes visited their regions



Shrines often mark these spots



Helped diverse communities **connect with and adopt** the epics as their own



1. A shrine in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, celebrating Rāma's passing through the area. 2. A seal from Mohenjodaro.

Sacred Groves: Challenges and Preservation



India once had **thousands of sacred groves**.



Numbers are **shrinking** due to **encroachment** for agriculture and industry.



Despite this, many **sacred groves remain protected** in various regions.



They continue to play a vital role in **biodiversity conservation**.

Sacred Groves and Environmental Protection



Rural and tribal communities **protect natural forests** as **sacred spaces**



Forests seen as **abodes of deities** (e.g., Ryngkew or Basa in Meghalaya)



These forests are called '**sacred groves**'



Sacred status helps **prevent hunting, tree felling, mining**



Sacred groves support **rich biodiversity** of plants and animals



Often contain **small water bodies** aiding in **water conservation.**

Kalkai temple, Mulshi, Maharashtra
Mawphlong, Shillong



From the sacred groves of the Bhils
Udaiyankudukadu Karumbayiramkondan, Tamil Nadu



From Pilgrimage to Trade

- Pilgrims meet **traders and merchants** along their routes
- Traders supply **goods needed by pilgrims**
- **Pilgrimage and trade routes often overlap**
- Some **traders are also pilgrims**, combining commerce with devotion
- This interaction **boosts economy and cultural exchange**



Sacred Geography Beyond India

Sacred geography exists in many cultures worldwide

Ancient Greece: sacred mountains, groves, and landmarks

Native Americans: deep spiritual bond with Nature

Maoris of New Zealand:

- Regard **Taranaki Maunga** as an ancestor and sacred
- Recently granted the mountain **legal rights** as a human being
- Community elders act as the **voice protecting sacred sites**

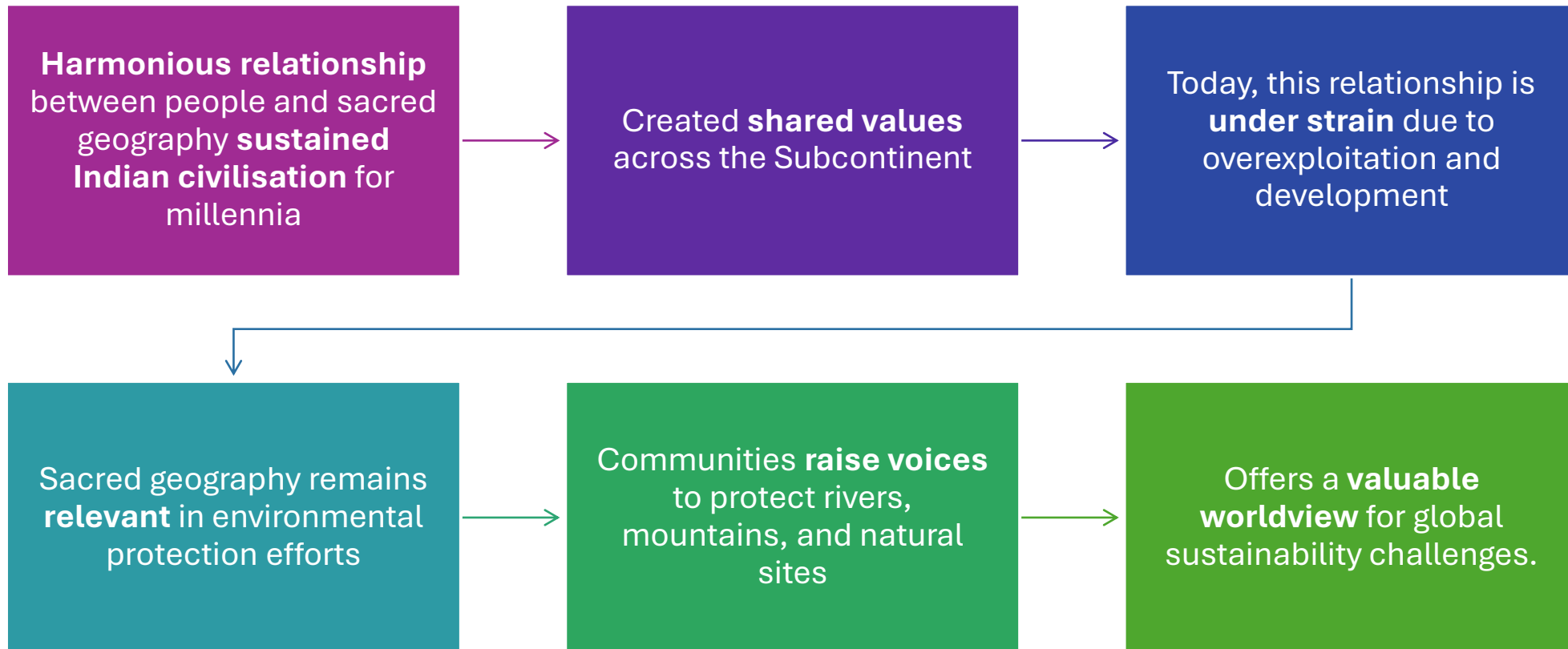
Such practices help **prevent exploitation and degradation** of sacred places.



Restoring and conserving the sacred



Sacred Geography: Past, Present, and Future



Match the Following:

Given below are the names of a few sacred groves in a few regional languages of India. Can you add to this?

Malayalam	<i>kāvu</i>
Tamil	<i>kovilkādu</i>
Kannada	<i>devare kādu</i>
Marathi	<i>devarāī</i>
Khasi (Meghalaya)	<i>khlaw kyntang</i>
Hindi (Himachal Pradesh)	<i>dev van</i>
Jharkhand	<i>sarnā</i>
Chhattisgarh	<i>devgudi</i>
Rajasthan	<i>oraṇ</i>



THANK YOU