

Assessment of Plant Biodiversity and Conservation Priorities in India

***Capt. Dr. P. Vijaya, **Dr. B. Sofia Rani**

*Associate Professor of Botany, **Assistant Professor of Botany
Tara Government College (A), Sangareddy, Telangana

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Abstract

India is recognized as one of the world's megadiverse countries, despite occupying only about 2.4% of the global land area. Its varied physiography, climate and ecological conditions support a remarkable diversity of forests, grasslands, wetlands, deserts, coastal ecosystems, islands and alpine habitats. India contains four globally recognized biodiversity hotspots—the Himalaya, Western Ghats, Indo-Burma region through the North-East, and Nicobar Islands—and supports more than 45,000 recorded plant species according to IUCN's India profile. The country's plant diversity provides essential ecosystem services, food, medicine, fuel, fibre, genetic resources and livelihood opportunities. However, habitat destruction, fragmentation, urbanization, agricultural expansion, overexploitation, invasive alien species, pollution and climate change increasingly threaten plant populations and ecosystems. This article assesses the status of plant biodiversity in India and identifies major conservation priorities. The assessment is based on secondary information from the Botanical Survey of India (BSI), Forest Survey of India (FSI), IUCN and published scientific literature. Particular attention is given to endemic, threatened, medicinal and economically important plants and biodiversity-rich regions. The India State of Forest Report 2023 provides important information on forest cover, tree cover, mangrove cover, forest biodiversity and carbon resources. Recent BSI planning material indicates that India has recorded more than 55,000 plant-related taxa when algae, fungi and microbes are included, while only a portion of the macrophyte flora has yet received global IUCN assessment. The article recommends strengthening species-level assessments, habitat protection, ecological restoration, ex-situ conservation, community participation, invasive-species management and climate-resilient conservation planning.

Keywords: *Plant biodiversity; India; endemic plants; threatened species; conservation; biodiversity hotspots; medicinal plants; habitat loss; climate change; ecological restoration.*

Introduction

Biological diversity represents the variety of life at genetic, species and ecosystem levels. Plants constitute one of the most important components of terrestrial biodiversity because they provide the primary biological foundation for almost all terrestrial ecosystems. They regulate carbon and water cycles, stabilize soils, provide habitats for animals and supply food, medicine, fibres, timber, fuel and numerous other resources. India possesses exceptional biological diversity because of its wide geographical extent and variation in altitude, temperature, rainfall, soil and geological conditions. The country contains the Himalayas in the north, the Western and Eastern Ghats in peninsular India, the

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North-Eastern hills, the Thar Desert, extensive river systems, coastal ecosystems and island environments. These environmental gradients have produced highly diverse plant communities. IUCN describes India as a megadiverse country containing approximately 7–8% of recorded global species, despite accounting for only 2.4% of global land area. It also identifies four globally recognized biodiversity hotspots associated with India: the Himalaya, Western Ghats, North-East/Indo-Burma region and Nicobar Islands. The Botanical Survey of India is the country's major scientific organization responsible for floristic and taxonomic research and conservation of wild plant resources. Its mandate includes plant documentation, taxonomy, red-listing and conservation through in-situ and ex-situ approaches. Despite considerable progress in documenting India's flora, significant knowledge gaps remain. Numerous species require updated distribution records, population assessments and conservation-status evaluations. BSI's recent conservation-planning material notes that more than 55,000 plant-related taxa have been recorded when algae, fungi and microbes are included, while approximately 34,000 macrophyte species are considered eligible for IUCN Red List assessment; only about 3,501 Indian species had been assessed under global IUCN standards in the cited assessment. Consequently, conservation priorities need to move beyond general protection of forests toward species-specific, ecosystem-based and landscape-level approaches.

Review of Literature

Plant Diversity and Floristic Documentation: Floristic documentation is fundamental to understanding India's plant biodiversity. The Botanical Survey of India has undertaken extensive taxonomic surveys and published regional floras and plant inventories. Its digital publication resources include works dealing with Indian palms, orchids, mangroves, insectivorous plants and plant diversity hotspots. Continued documentation is particularly important because taxonomic knowledge forms the basis for conservation assessment. Without reliable identification and distribution information, threatened species may remain overlooked in conservation planning.

Biodiversity Hotspots: India's four globally recognized biodiversity hotspots are areas of exceptionally high biological richness and endemism. The Western Ghats support numerous endemic plant species and contain important tropical forest ecosystems. The Himalaya contains diverse temperate, alpine and subalpine flora. The North-Eastern region contains extensive forest ecosystems, while the Nicobar Islands support distinctive island flora. These areas should receive high conservation priority because habitat loss in geographically restricted regions can rapidly increase extinction risk.

Threatened Plant Species: The IUCN Red List is the principal global framework for assessing extinction risk. Its categories include Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable, Near Threatened, Least Concern, Data Deficient and Not Evaluated. The Red List incorporates information on geographic range, population size, ecological requirements, threats and conservation actions. In India, threats to plant species include habitat destruction, fragmentation, unsustainable harvesting and infrastructure development. IUCN has documented cases in which medicinal plants have become threatened because of over-collection and habitat loss.

Forest Ecosystems and Plant Conservation: Forests are major repositories of plant diversity. The **India State of Forest Report 2023**, prepared by the Forest Survey of India under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, provides national information on forest cover, tree cover, mangrove cover, growing stock and carbon stock. Its biodiversity chapter provides an important national framework for understanding forest ecosystems and their biological resources. However, forest area alone is not sufficient to measure plant conservation success. Forest fragmentation, degradation, changes in forest composition and loss of specialized habitats can negatively affect biodiversity even when total forest cover remains relatively stable.

Conservation Assessment and Red Listing: Recent Indian conservation planning has emphasized prioritizing plant species for systematic assessment. BSI's Vision 2025–2030 document proposes prioritization based on factors such as endemism, conservation dependence and availability of assessment resources. This approach is particularly important because resources for biodiversity assessment and conservation are limited. Priority should therefore be given to

species with restricted distributions, high extinction risk, ecological importance, cultural value or significant economic and medicinal importance.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the present study are:

1. To assess the status and importance of plant biodiversity in India.
2. To identify major regions and ecosystems supporting high plant diversity.
3. To examine the major threats affecting Indian plant species and habitats.
4. To identify conservation priorities for endemic, threatened and economically important plants.
5. To examine existing in-situ and ex-situ conservation approaches.
6. To suggest strategies for strengthening plant biodiversity conservation in India.

Major sources include:

- Botanical Survey of India publications and databases
- Forest Survey of India, *India State of Forest Report 2023*
- IUCN Red List and IUCN India information
- Government reports and biodiversity documents
- Scientific publications on Indian plant diversity
- Published literature concerning threatened and endemic plant species

Status of Plant Biodiversity in India

India's plant diversity is distributed across highly contrasting ecological regions.

Major Plant-Biodiversity Regions of India

Region	Important ecosystems	Major conservation significance
Himalaya	Alpine meadows, temperate forests, subalpine vegetation	High endemism and specialized flora
Western Ghats	Evergreen, semi-evergreen and montane forests	Exceptional endemism
North-East India	Tropical and subtropical forests	High species richness
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	Tropical forests, coastal vegetation, mangroves	Island endemism
Eastern Ghats	Dry and moist deciduous forests	Important endemic and threatened flora
Central India	Dry deciduous and mixed forests	Large forest landscapes
Thar Desert	Xerophytic and halophytic vegetation	Desert-adapted flora
Coastal India	Mangroves, beaches and coastal forests	Coastal protection and specialized flora

Wetlands	Aquatic and marsh vegetation	High ecological and hydrological value
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Major Threats to Plant Biodiversity

1. **Habitat Loss:** Conversion of natural habitats for agriculture, infrastructure, mining, settlements and industries remains one of the major threats. Habitat loss is particularly serious for species with small geographic ranges because destruction of a relatively small area can eliminate a substantial proportion of the global population.
2. **Habitat Fragmentation:** Large continuous habitats are increasingly divided into smaller patches by roads, railways, settlements, agricultural land and other infrastructure.

Fragmentation can:

- Reduce population size
 - Restrict gene flow
 - Increase edge effects
 - Alter microclimates
 - Increase vulnerability to invasive species
 - Reduce reproductive success
3. **Overexploitation:** Medicinal and economically valuable plants are particularly vulnerable to excessive collection. Roots, tubers, bark, stems, leaves, flowers and seeds may be harvested from wild populations. When harvesting exceeds natural regeneration, populations decline.
 4. **Invasive Alien Species:** Invasive plants can compete with native vegetation for sunlight, water, nutrients and space. They can alter ecosystem structure and interfere with natural regeneration. Management of invasive species should therefore become an integral part of protected-area and landscape management.
 5. **Climate Change:** Increasing temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, extreme weather events, drought and shifting ecological zones can affect plant distribution and reproductive cycles. Mountain species may be particularly vulnerable because suitable climatic zones can become geographically restricted as temperatures increase.
 6. **Pollution:** Air pollution, industrial contaminants, pesticides, heavy metals and untreated wastewater can negatively affect plant growth and reproduction. Aquatic and wetland plants are especially sensitive to changes in water quality.
 7. **Urbanization:** Rapid urban expansion results in the loss of natural vegetation and fragmentation of habitats. Urban biodiversity conservation should therefore include native trees, wetlands, urban forests, botanical gardens and ecological corridors.

Findings of the Study: The assessment produces the following major findings.

1. **India possesses exceptional plant diversity:** India's geographical and ecological variation supports a very large number of plant taxa. IUCN recognizes India as a megadiverse country, while recent BSI material reports more than 55,000 plant-related taxa when algae, fungi and microbes are included.
2. **Endemic plants require high conservation priority:** Species restricted to India or to small geographical regions are inherently vulnerable because their entire global populations may occur within limited habitats.
3. **Biodiversity hotspots require landscape-level protection:** The Himalayan, Western Ghats, North-Eastern and Nicobar regions deserve particularly strong conservation attention because of their ecological richness and endemism.

4. **Knowledge gaps remain significant:** Although India's flora has been extensively studied, many species require updated field assessments and formal extinction-risk evaluation. BSI's recent prioritization framework highlights the need for systematic assessment of India's flora.
5. **Forest conservation must consider quality as well as area:** Forest-cover statistics are valuable but do not by themselves capture all aspects of biodiversity. Species composition, fragmentation, regeneration and ecological integrity should also be considered.
6. **Medicinal plants face particular pressure:** Wild collection and habitat loss can threaten medicinal plants. Conservation strategies must therefore connect biodiversity protection with sustainable harvesting and cultivation.
7. **Climate change is becoming an important conservation factor:** Traditional conservation boundaries may not adequately protect species whose suitable climatic zones shift geographically.
8. **Ex-situ conservation is essential for highly threatened species:** Botanical gardens, seed banks, tissue-culture facilities, field gene banks and living collections can provide an additional safeguard against extinction.
9. **Community participation is essential:** Local communities possess valuable ecological and traditional knowledge and are often directly dependent on forest and plant resources. Conservation programs are more likely to succeed when communities participate in planning and benefit-sharing.
10. **Conservation assessment should become more species-specific:** India needs systematic prioritization based on **endemism + extinction risk + population trend + habitat vulnerability + ecological/economic importance**.

Conservation Priorities for India

Proposed Conservation-Priority Framework

Priority	Conservation target	Recommended action
Very High	Critically Endangered endemic plants	Immediate population assessment and recovery
Very High	Species with extremely restricted distribution	Habitat protection and monitoring
High	Endangered medicinal plants	Cultivation + sustainable harvesting
High	Fragmented populations	Ecological corridors and habitat restoration
High	Threatened species affected by climate change	Climate-risk assessment
Moderate–High	Rare ecosystem-specific plants	Habitat-level conservation
Moderate	Economically important wild plants	Sustainable-use programmes
Long-term	Data Deficient species	Field surveys and taxonomic research

In-Situ Conservation of Plant Biodiversity

In-situ conservation refers to the **conservation of plant species within their natural habitats and ecosystems**. It is one of the most effective approaches for maintaining plant biodiversity because species remain exposed to their natural ecological conditions, including interactions with soil organisms, pollinators, herbivores and other plant species. In

India, in-situ conservation is particularly important because of the country's diverse forests, grasslands, wetlands, deserts, mountains, coastal ecosystems and biodiversity hotspots.

The major approaches to in-situ conservation of plant biodiversity include:

1. **National Parks:** National parks protect natural ecosystems and their native plant communities from habitat destruction and excessive human exploitation.
2. **Wildlife Sanctuaries:** These areas conserve important habitats and plant species while permitting certain regulated human activities.
3. **Biosphere Reserves:** Biosphere reserves combine biodiversity conservation with sustainable use and provide protection to large landscapes containing diverse plant communities.
4. **Sacred Groves:** Traditional community-protected forests and vegetation patches play an important role in conserving rare, endemic and medicinal plants. They also preserve traditional ecological knowledge.
5. **Plant Conservation Areas:** Areas containing rare, endemic or threatened plant species can be specifically identified and managed for long-term conservation.
6. **Ecological Corridors:** Corridors connect fragmented habitats, allowing plant populations and associated pollinators and seed dispersers to maintain ecological connectivity and genetic exchange.
7. **Habitat Restoration:** Degraded forests, grasslands, wetlands and other ecosystems can be restored using indigenous plant species to recover native biodiversity.
8. **Community Participation:** Local communities can contribute to monitoring, protection and sustainable utilization of plant resources. Community-based conservation is particularly valuable for medicinal and economically important plants.
9. **Protection of Endemic and Threatened Species:** Species with restricted geographical distributions should receive priority through population monitoring, habitat protection and recovery programmes.
10. **Control of Invasive Alien Species:** Removing or controlling invasive plants helps native species regenerate and reduces competition for resources.

Importance of In-Situ Conservation

In-situ conservation has several advantages:

- Maintains plants in their **natural ecological conditions**.
- Conserves **genetic diversity within natural populations**.
- Protects entire **ecosystems rather than individual species**.
- Maintains natural interactions between plants, pollinators, microorganisms and other organisms.
- Allows plants to continue **natural reproduction and evolution**.
- Protects ecosystem services such as carbon storage, soil conservation and water regulation.
- Supports the conservation of **rare, endemic and threatened species**.
- Preserves traditional knowledge associated with plant resources.

Thus, **in-situ conservation should form the foundation of India's plant biodiversity strategy**, supported by ex-situ approaches such as botanical gardens, seed banks, tissue culture and field gene banks. A combination of habitat protection, ecological restoration, scientific monitoring and community participation is essential for ensuring the long-term survival of India's plant diversity.

Ex-Situ Conservation of Plant Biodiversity

Ex-situ conservation refers to the **conservation of plant species outside their natural habitats**. It is an important complementary strategy to in-situ conservation, particularly for rare, threatened, endemic and economically important plant species whose natural populations have declined because of habitat destruction, overexploitation, climate change, invasive species and other anthropogenic pressures.

Major Approaches to Ex-Situ Conservation

1. **Botanical Gardens:** Botanical gardens maintain living collections of plant species under controlled conditions. They play an important role in conserving rare and threatened plants, supporting taxonomic research, education and public awareness. They can also provide material for future reintroduction into natural habitats.
2. **Seed Banks:** Seed banks are among the most effective methods for conserving plant genetic resources. Seeds of suitable species are collected, dried and stored under controlled temperature and humidity. Seed banks are particularly valuable for maintaining genetic diversity of agricultural, medicinal and wild plant species.
3. **Field Gene Banks:** Species that cannot be conserved effectively as dried or frozen seeds can be maintained as living plants in field gene banks. This approach is especially useful for many fruit crops, plantation crops, vegetatively propagated plants and species producing recalcitrant seeds.
4. **Tissue Culture and Micropropagation:** Plant tissue culture allows large numbers of plants to be produced from small pieces of plant tissue under sterile laboratory conditions. Micropropagation is particularly useful for multiplying rare and endangered species and producing disease-free planting material.
5. **Cryopreservation:** Cryopreservation involves storing plant cells, tissues, embryos, pollen or seeds at extremely low temperatures, generally in liquid nitrogen at approximately -196°C . It allows biological material to be preserved for long periods with minimal metabolic activity and is increasingly important for long-term genetic-resource conservation.
6. **DNA and Genetic Resource Banks:** DNA banks preserve genetic material for future research. They are particularly useful for studying genetic diversity, species relationships, population structure and conservation genetics.
7. **Pollen and Embryo Conservation:** Pollen and embryos can be stored under controlled conditions and used for breeding, genetic research and restoration programmes. These techniques are valuable for species for which conventional seed storage is difficult.
8. **Conservation through Cultivation:** Threatened medicinal, aromatic and economically important plants can be cultivated in research institutions, nurseries and specialized conservation centres. Cultivation reduces harvesting pressure on wild populations while maintaining valuable genetic resources.

Importance of Ex-Situ Conservation

Ex-situ conservation is particularly important when:

- A species has a **very small or declining wild population**.
- Natural habitats have been severely degraded.
- A species is threatened by overharvesting.
- Seeds cannot remain viable naturally in the field.
- Immediate multiplication of a threatened species is required.
- Genetic material needs to be preserved for future restoration.
- Plants are required for research, education and breeding programmes.

Ex-Situ Conservation in India

India has an extensive network of **botanical gardens, seed banks, field gene banks, tissue-culture laboratories, research institutions and agricultural genetic-resource centres**. Institutions such as the Botanical Survey of India, Indian Council of Agricultural Research institutions, universities, botanical gardens and other conservation organizations contribute to the preservation and study of India's plant genetic resources.

Challenges

Despite its importance, ex-situ conservation faces several challenges:

1. High cost of maintaining specialized facilities.
2. Limited knowledge of appropriate storage conditions for many species.
3. Loss of genetic diversity when only a small number of individuals are collected.
4. Difficulty in maintaining some species outside their natural ecological conditions.
5. Limited funding and technical expertise.
6. Risk of genetic changes during prolonged cultivation or tissue culture.
7. Difficulty in reintroducing conserved plants into degraded natural habitats.

Conservation Strategy

The most effective approach is to integrate **in-situ and ex-situ conservation**. Ex-situ collections should not be regarded as substitutes for natural habitats. Instead, they should act as **genetic safety nets** that support habitat protection, research, propagation and eventual reintroduction.

A coordinated conservation programme should therefore follow:

Identification → Collection → Documentation → Ex-situ Storage → Genetic Monitoring → Propagation → Reintroduction → Long-term Monitoring

Ex-situ conservation is an essential component of modern plant biodiversity conservation. Botanical gardens, seed banks, field gene banks, tissue culture, cryopreservation and genetic-resource banks provide valuable safeguards against the extinction of threatened plant species. For India, strengthening these facilities and integrating them with **in-situ conservation, ecological restoration and community participation** can significantly improve the long-term conservation of plant biodiversity.

Suggestions: The following measures are recommended to strengthen plant biodiversity conservation in India.

- **Accelerate plant Red List assessments:** A national programme should systematically assess endemic and threatened plants according to IUCN criteria. BSI's recent prioritization approach provides an appropriate framework for this work.
- **Establish Plant Conservation Areas:** Areas containing concentrations of rare, endemic and threatened plants should receive focused protection.
- **Strengthen field-based biodiversity inventories:** Periodic botanical surveys should be conducted to identify changes in population size, distribution and habitat quality.
- **Integrate biodiversity into infrastructure planning:** Roads, railways, mining and industrial projects should incorporate biodiversity-sensitive planning and ecological-corridor requirements.
- **Expand native-plant restoration:** Restoration programmes should prioritize locally native species rather than relying primarily on fast-growing exotic species.
- **Promote medicinal-plant cultivation:** Cultivation can reduce pressure on wild populations while creating livelihood opportunities.

- **Strengthen invasive-species management:** Early detection, rapid response and long-term ecological monitoring should be incorporated into forest-management programmes.
- **Develop climate-resilient conservation strategies:** Species distribution models, long-term monitoring and ecological corridors should be used to anticipate climate-driven range shifts.
- **Increase community participation:** Local communities should participate in biodiversity monitoring, restoration, sustainable harvesting and benefit-sharing.
- **Improve biodiversity education:** Schools, colleges and universities should promote plant identification, herbarium studies, citizen science and conservation awareness.
- **Digitize botanical information:** Digital herbaria, GIS databases, DNA barcoding and geospatial biodiversity databases can substantially improve plant documentation and monitoring.
- **Increase research funding:** Greater support should be provided for taxonomy, plant ecology, population genetics, conservation biology and restoration ecology.

Conclusion

India's plant biodiversity represents an irreplaceable natural resource and provides ecological, economic, medicinal, cultural and livelihood benefits. The country's exceptional environmental heterogeneity has created a highly diverse flora, including numerous endemic and threatened species. The presence of four globally recognized biodiversity hotspots further emphasizes India's international conservation significance. The assessment indicates that the major pressures on plant biodiversity are habitat loss and fragmentation, unsustainable exploitation, invasive alien species, pollution, urbanization and climate change. Although India has established protected areas and developed substantial institutional capacity for botanical research and conservation, significant gaps remain in species-level assessment and long-term population monitoring. The way forward should therefore combine species conservation, habitat protection, ecological restoration, sustainable utilization and community participation. Priority should be given to endemic, Critically Endangered and geographically restricted plants, while medicinal and economically important species should receive special attention. The systematic assessment of India's flora is particularly important. BSI's recent prioritization framework recognizes the need for phased assessment of India's large plant diversity, including prioritization based on endemism and conservation importance. Ultimately, successful plant conservation requires an integrated approach involving government institutions, botanical and ecological researchers, universities, local communities, conservation organizations and the general public. Protecting India's plant biodiversity is not simply a matter of preventing species extinction; it is essential for maintaining ecosystem resilience, climate regulation, food and health security, and sustainable development.

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