Significance of ‘Kavu’ - A Note on the Sacred Groves of Kerala in Eco-Cultural Context

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ABSTRACT Sacred groves are locally called as ‘Kavu’ were the fundamental aspects of Keralas religious and ritualistic traditions. In ecological terms a sacred grove means the cross section of an evergreen forest which contain innumerable types of plant species including medicinal ones. Some of the rare plant species are identified from the sacred groves of Kerala by Botanists. It also contain rare animal species and butterflies. It can play a major role in the maintenance of ecological equilibrium, water supply and also gives raw materials for artistic and industrial purposes. They are also culturally significant.

INTRODUCTION

Kerala, the land of charity is rich in folk culture, traditions and artistic festivals. Different religions, groups and communities in their historical evolution have subscribed to the growth of a dream like panorama of dance and visual art forms in this region. The indigenous tribal culture and language, defined and categorised by the scholars as ‘Dravidian’ were nourished by the Aryan culture and the Sanskrit language. The so called Hinduism, the religion of the land, was characterized by much synthesis. This particular aspect could be traced in the traditional culture of Kerala.

Sacred groves locally called as ‘Kavu’ were the fundamental aspect of Kerala’s ritualistic traditions. One cannot deny the role of sacred groves in giving a particular identity to Kerala’s culture. Approximately four hundred types of ‘Theyyam’ (Theyam is a popular ritual dance of Kerala, especially in the northern region. As a living cult with centuries traditions, rituals and customs, it embraces almost all castes and classes of Hindu religion. The term ‘Theyyam’ is a corrupt from of ‘Deivam’ or God, is believed to be connected with the sacred groves of Kerala.

Sacred groves are widely distributed almost throughout the world. Frazer in his famous treatise ‘The Golden Bough’ has given a variety of examples of the sacred groves from the Aryan race in Europe, and India, Australia, America, Africa, China, Japan and other places. In India sacred groves are known in different names such as ‘Devray’ in Maharashtra, ‘Devarkand’ and ‘Siddaryanam’ in Karnataka, ‘Oraans’, ‘Kenkari’ and ‘Yogmaya’ in Rajasthan and ‘Saranya’ in Bihar.

The institution of sacred groves is a kind of mechanism evolved by man for nature conservation (Roy Burman, 1992). The World Conservation Monitoring Centre (1988) states that sacred grove is a very old institution which is thought to date back several thousand years or at least the pre-agrarian period of hunter gatherer societies. The Centre further states that these forest patches were usually dedicated to a deity, and were afforded special protection with only limited use of fires and droughts.

Gadgil and Vartak state, “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” (Gadgil and Vartak, 1976). Paranjpye states. “Sacred groves refer to a patch of forest, or for a part of a larger forest, which is left untouched by the local inhabitants for all practical purposes.” (Paranjpye, 1989).
About the sacred groves of Kerala, Nair states, ‘In Kerala among the Namboodiris and Nairs, there is the practice of worshipping goddess Durga and serpent Naga as household deities. Traditionally each family had set up a part of the land around the homestead as the abode of Durga or Naga or both. This place was called ‘Kavu’. As Durga is supposed to be a forest goddess, a forest like abode had to be created in the place of her worship. The Naga, the second most popular deity of worship, also needed a grove to enable it to move around freely and without fear of loss of life. Thus for worshipping both Durga and Naga, grove became essential and they were accordingly made. For fear of incurring the wrath of the deity of the grove, people abstained from poaching or trespassing into these groves and as a result, over time, a thick flora began to grow in and around these groves making comfortable abode for reptiles, birds and small animals’ (Nair, 1992).

In ecological terms, a sacred grove means the cross section of an evergreen forest. Diversity is the fundamental feature of this genetic resource which contain innumerable types of plant species including rare medicinal plants and plants of high economic value.

**SACRED GROVES AND ENDEMIC PLANTS**

Certain endemic species of plants are found only in the sacred groves. For example, the plants such as Holygarna boddami, Moula spycatta, Hemidesmus indikoores, Cycgiium travancoorikum... etc., are some of the endemic species of plants found only in the sacred groves of North Kerala (Unnikrishnan, 1997). A new species of Lepidagathis known as Lepidagathis keralensis is also identified from the sacred groves of North Kerala (Madhusoodanan and Singh, 1992). Rare species of Orchids are also available from here. Among the two hundred and forty species of Orchids found in Kerala most of them are identified from the sacred groves. For example, the different species of Nervelia and Hebanaria. In this regard sacred groves are significant in the preservation of genetic diversity as a micro ecological niche.

**SACRED GROVES AND ANIMAL RESOURCES**

Tortoises, Monitor lizard, and different species of snakes constitute inhabitants of this peculiar ecological niche. It is also estimated that approximately eleven species of Amphibia are identified in the sacred groves of Kerala. More over, among the four hundred species of birds in Kerala, about 50 per cent are noticed in the sacred groves of northern parts. The species of birds like Plovers, Stilts, Sandpipers, Snipes, and Osprey from Euracia and one black caped Kingfisher are also found here.

Mammals such as Bonnet monkey, Nilgiri Langoor, common mongoose, Indian Fox... etc. are found in some of the sacred groves. Rare species like common palm Civet, small Indian Civet and malabar large spotted Civet... etc. are also identified from north Kerala. Common Otter were also found here. Flying mammals such as flying fox (coming under magakiroptera) and insectivorous microkropites are also available in the sacred groves. In addition to these, a large number of the different families of Butterflies and spiders are also identified from the sacred groves of Kerala especially from northern region.

**ECOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS**

Sacred groves act as a good shelter for a number of animals and birds. Among these, some of them are predators. Through providing an ecosystem to these predatory animals and birds the sacred groves can reduce the loss of farmers to a limited extent. For example, Owl and some species of cats can eat a number of rats (which is a predominant threat to the crops) in a year. These Owls are seen only in the bushy areas. By maintaining the sacred groves near the agricultural fields the crops can be saved from destructive creatures.

Some fruits, nuts, berries and tubers from the groves are edible ones. This is consumed by
the nearby inhabitants in several ways. During
lean months the poor villagers depend on these
items for consumption. Amorphophallus
tsylvacus, Cycas cinctinalis, Discorea bulifera,
Dioscorea oppositifolia, Neetrumyoola,
Remusatia vivipara ... etc. are some of the ed-
ible items available from the sacred groves.

Most of the sacred groves in Kerala are pro-
vided with a lot of medicinal plants and other medically important plant materials. Through
the preservation of these medicinal plants the
indigenous medical practices of the villagers can
be maintained along with other medical systems.
Moreover a sacred grove is a genetic resource
by all means. The related species of our cash
crops such as ginger, turmeric, pepper, carda-
mom and some of the tubers are available here.
These different species can be utilised for the
hybridisation of new species of cash crops which
are economically more advanced.

Sacred groves also supply raw materials for
artistic purposes and small scale handmade indus-
tries. A plant locally called 'Cherikkotta'
(Grewia microcos) available in the sacred grove
are usually used by the traditional 'theyyam'
artists for preparing the drum beating stick. The
long hairs used by the 'theyyam' are also pre-
pared from the species of Strangler figs such as
Ficus amplisma and Ficus thejhela, Ficus
bunchamina and Ficus thejhela are also used
for preparing strings for agricultural purposes.
The powdered tender leaves of 'vetti' (Aporosa
lidleyana) are used on the cut end of the coco-
nut flower bunch to increase the quantity of
toddy. In south Kerala today, toddy-tappers
commonly use 'onannonpo' (Algeria nervosa)
for this purpose which is largely available in
the sacred groves.

A sacred grove is also capable for supple-
menting all the functions of a small forest. Usu-
ally these are situated in the midst of the thickly
populated areas. Because of that only it can sup-
plement more functions than a forest. As these
groves contain lot of flora, large amounts of
water molecules are expelled by osmosis and
thus to provide a healthy climate at least around
its surroundings. The leaf foliage in the sacred
groves can act as a good preservative of rain
water and it permitted only the slow entry of
rain water to soil thereby increasing the water
resources of the area. It is estimated that one
hectare forest soil can preserve approximately
15000 litres of water. This can be sufficient
to water three hectares of agricultural lands and
thereby provide an increase in income of rup-
pees 20,000 (it is calculated that one cubic me-
tre water can create a new value of one and a
half rupee in the field of agriculture). This soil
water enrich our wells and ponds and thereby
the increase of agricultural production.

The leaf foliage and the remnants of bio-
logical objects constitute a good humus over the
soil and it absorb amonia, carbon dioxide and
steam from the atmosphere and maintain an ade-
uate temperature of the soil. More over these
humus being a good fertilizer, flow along with
water and enrich the lowland agricultural fields
in rainy season. Due to deforestation and other
destructive measures these areas are converted
to laterite deserts. By maintaining the sacred
groves as such these disadvantages can be
checked to a minimum extend.

The religious significant attached to sacred
groves, protects these areas from large scale
destruction when compared to the deforestation
activities in other areas of the State. If these
sacred groves are handed over to the social fore-
stry department for conservation, the original
evergreen plants were definitely replaced by
exotic species of plants. So efforts should be
given to maintain the traditional nature of sa-
cred groves, as these are the archetypes of
Kerala's culture.

As Frazer states "we find that the hunt-
ing gathering tribal societies of the
tropics and subtropics had evolved a
variety of cultural restraints on explo-
tation of plants and animals around
them. In these pre-scientists societies
these restraints were not expressed as
deliberate attempts to maintain
populations of plants and animals of
value to the tribe. Instead these prac-
tices were relationalized as nature wor-
ship and religious taboos of various
sorts" (Frazer, 1922).

Taking all these into consideration we must
first try to manage the sacred groves as the in-
stitution of a culture more than the institution
of people or religion.
They are the traditional cultural centres of a particular village. Some of the popular traditional arts of Kerala such as 'theyyam' were flourished from the background of these sacred groves. More over they are the age old religious centres. The myths, legends, beliefs, customs and traditions related to sacred groves give light on many historical aspects especially to the ancient back of Kerala history.

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