

## 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 Kerala's 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' (Theyyam 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 form 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*, *Moulava spycatta*, *Hemidesmus indikoors*, *Cycigium 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 lizzard, 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 *microkropteres* 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 sylvaticus*, *Cycas circinalis*, *Dioscorea bulbifera*, *Dioscorea oppositifolia*, *Neettumyoola*, *Remusatia vivipara* ... etc. are some of the edible items available from the sacred groves.

Most of the sacred groves in Kerala are provided 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, cardamom 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 industries. A plant locally called 'Cherikkotta' (*Grewia microcos*) available in the sacred grove are usually used by the traditional 'theyyhan' artists for preparing the drum beating stick. The long hairs used by the 'theyyam' are also prepared from the species of Strangler figs such as *Ficus amplissima* and *Ficus thejhela*, *Ficus bunchamina* and *Ficus thejhela* are also used for preparing strings for agricultural purposes. The powdered tender leaves of 'vetty' (*Aporosa lidleyana*) are used on the cut end of the coconut flower bunch to increase the quantity of toddy. In south Kerala today, toddy-tappers commonly use 'onappoo' (*Algeria nervosa*) for this purpose which is largely available in the sacred groves.

A sacred grove is also capable for supplementing all the functions of a small forest. Usually these are situated in the midst of the thickly populated areas. Because of that only it can supplement 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 foliages in the sacred groves can act as a good preserver 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 rupees 20,000 (it is calculated that one cubic metre 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 foliages and the remnants of biological objects constitute a good humus over the soil and it absorb ammonia, carbon dioxide and steam from the atmosphere and maintain an adequate 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 extent.

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 forestry 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 sacred groves, as these are the archetypes of Kerala's culture.

As Frazer states "we find that the hunting gathering tribal societies of the tropics and subtropics had evolved a variety of cultural restraints on exploitation 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 practices were relationalized as nature worship and religious taboos of various sorts" (Frazer, 1922).

Taking all these into consideration we must first try to manage the sacred groves as the institution 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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