



## SACRED SPACES: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SACRED GROVES OF KERALA, SOUTHERN INDIA

Dr. Leela P. U.

Ph.D , Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology ,  
St: Teresa's College, Ernakulam , Kerala, India.

### ABSTRACT :

The concept corresponding to what we usually call sacred grove in the literature is turned as 'Kavu' in Malayalam<sup>1</sup>. Physically the modern 'Kavu' is a piece of garden or forest land, but what it culturally defines is that it is dedicated for the exclusive use of particular deities; it is 'guarded' in their interests. Sacred groves have been typically presented as strands of primeval forest, left undistributed for reasons of deep religious sentiments at their climax stage of floristic succession<sup>2</sup>. Sacred groves is the religious concept (sankalpam) that a deity resides in, or regularly resorts to and uses a grove or garden that make it a kavu. These religious concepts pertain to a kavu that has the area of a temple about it.... When we say kavu, this is a place of worship, exactly like a temple<sup>3</sup>.

**KEYWORDS :** personal powers , temple model , Sacred groves.

### INTRODUCTION

Sacred groves follow directly from their assimilation to the temple model of divine property: first their use is exclusively reserved for the divine beings who own them, and second, there is this personalistic idiom of owner or lordship-those uses refers to a particular deity's needs. As these are culturally manifest through a combination of oracles, personal powers and desires of groves through their owners or managers. <sup>4</sup>Neither of these principles nor their resultant outcomes have any direct relation to the environmentalists' ideals of bio-conversation, which make it imperative that we attend to cultural actualities of belief and practice instead. When we do so, what we in fact find is that many examples which we might regard as human disturbances, resources exploitation, and encroachment are happily accommodated within the cultural framework of the grove as the deities' personal preserve.<sup>5</sup>



Just as there are various practices specific to particular temples because they are culturally mandated for the god in question, so different practices are allowed or even enjoined under the same cultural rubric of *Kavu*, because different groves are devoted to different gods who have different histories and personal needs. This is to say that sacred groves are cultural projects, with varied histories as to their founding, uses, maintenance, and

<sup>1</sup> Menon, Achyutha, E (1943)

<sup>2</sup> S.K.Jain (1981)

<sup>3</sup> Freeman J.R((1999)

<sup>4</sup> Kalam M.A(1951)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p.25

resulting physical profiles.<sup>6</sup> While there is certainly a generalized ideal that a *Kavu* should represent a natural state of uninhibited growth, it is hardly possible by virtue of this view, most of them as pristine relics from a primeval past. To say culturally that they are created by divine fiat means socially that they are created through the politics of temple control and oracular readings.<sup>7</sup>

To extent that the peoples of Kerala traditionally view their vegetation as imbued with aspects of the sacred, those various trees, plants, groves and forests are regarded ambivalently as repositories of the sacred. Individual plants and trees are not normally considered to harbour spiritual powers or beings. Human relation with these depends on the nature of the interest in the plant resource and on the nature of the being believed to inhabit it. For example, a beneficent god residing in a tree outside a temple or in a household garden may be an object of worship. 'On the other hand, a spirit in a tree one wants to chop down for timber may be inimical and engage one in a supernatural battle for the wood. 'Demonic Sirens' called '*Yakshis*', typically live in Palmyra's and lure men at night up their trunks and gory deaths.<sup>8</sup>

Another vegetal complex often invoked in modern ecological discourse as evidence of the positive folk-values attached to the forest and the preservation of its bio-diversity, concern the purported medicinal value of many plant species. Despite the modernist pharmacological veneer given to government sponsored ayurvedic medicine, the theory and practice of Kerala's folk medicine is thoroughly enmeshed with principles of Frazerian sympathetic and contagious magic, as well as implication with supernatural beings and agencies. Indeed, traditional medicines, their properties, their gathering and their application are closely tied up with the worship of the god lings of sorcery (*mantravadam*).<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, there is also negative side to the quasi-magical medicinal properties of plants. From ancient times the forest has also been source of powerful poisons and magical potions connected with the sorcery and black magic. The tribal or low-caste masters of this jungle pharmacopoeia have thus also been seen as trafficking in the noxious supernatural beings, powers and substances of the forest, which has sometimes led to their being suspected, accused and even executed for practicing sorcery.

### DIFFERENT TYPES OF GROVES

On the basis of sea level, Kerala can be divided into three geographical categories-hill region (*malanadu*), coastal area (*theerasamathalam*) and plateau (*Edanadu*). *Kavus* are rarely seen in the hilly region, these regions were explored only in the last century by the Christian people from the south Kerala. *Saivist*, *Vaishnavist*, mother worship culminates in the groves and at the same time some spirits, ancestral worship etc also saw in them. Generally, *Kavus* categorized as *Kavus* for mother goddesses, *Kavus* for male god, animal god groves, and serpent groves.<sup>10</sup>

#### (i) Mother goddess Groves

It can be related to the Indian concept of supernatural mother goddess in the Indus valley civilization.<sup>11</sup> And in the Dravidian Sangam period they had the fertility cult related with 'Annapurna' and 'Sakumbri'.<sup>12</sup> The main mother goddess are worshipped in Kerala grove is Kali. And Kali is known in different names. Bhadria, Gauri, Durga, Karthiayani, and has got very narrative description in the popular village myth. Kali is also known in the name of Chamundi, Aachi, and Bhagavathi.

---

<sup>6</sup> J.R Freeman(1999)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p.265

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 273

<sup>9</sup> Vishnu Namboodri, M.V(1979)

<sup>10</sup> Unnikrishnan E, (1995)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid p.59

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p.59

## (ii) Male God Groves

The male god groves can be broadly classified into two- Saivist and Vaishnavist groves. But one can also see the 'Sastha', the village god cult in male god groves.

A majority of *Kavus* in Kerala have the serpent (*naga*) as the presiding deity. This was endorsed in PKB Nayar's study, which says: "out of 200 *Kavus*, 129 were devoted to the serpent god as the chief deity, 37 were devoted to Durga in her evil form (e.g. kali, chamundi, chantla) or refined form (e.g. Bhadrakali, Bhavani, or Bhagavathi). In over 20 *Kavus*, both the serpent god and kali were accorded an equal status. The third largest group of *Kavus* had Lord Sastha (who is also called Ayyappa) as the presiding deity. In the remaining cases there were a number of other gods and goddesses mainly from among the primitive pantheon. This last category also included ancestors of the owners".<sup>13</sup>

## Rituals and Worships in the Grove

PKB Nair's study about southern Kerala grove depicted about the worshipping patterns. He made four categories of *Kavu's* on the basis of rituals and worship.

- (1) "Some of them have been cleared of trees their deities were transferred to other places
- (2) In some cases the *kavu* became defunct because the owners sold the premise and the new masters were either of different religion or of different faith. In the latter cases the ritual of an annual *puja* as performed at the site supposed to have been abode of *Naga*.
- (3) In the third category all the original trees have gone, being sold by the owners and *Naga* is now worshipped in regular temple structures. There, all the rituals and beliefs are observed on modified form but without the flora. The place is still called *Kavu* even though there are no trees there.
- (4) There is a fourth category where one or a few of the old trees are symbolically preserved but everything else is modern."<sup>14</sup>

The rituals offered in the *Kavus* varied widely and were determined by the type of deity dominating the *kavu*. For example, in the Bhadrakali temple, the major daily rituals were *archanas* (offering of flowers), offering of cow's milk, sweet puddings, a red potion made out of mixing turmeric powder jaggery and slaked lime in water (*Guruti*) and making a '*Kalam*' (chequering of forms of deities out of different powder in different colours). The last one is favorite of both goddess Bhagavathi and serpent god. Offering plantain and tender coconut is also popular. The usual and most popular *puja* is the *Archanas* which has different variants known by different names and costing varying amounts. The offering consists of a *puja* with flowers to the god by the priests, accompanied by appropriate mantras. The *archanas* is performed by the priest in the name of star (zodiac sign) of the devotee offering the *archanas*. The day's very important for worshipping goddess kali are Tuesdays and Fridays. The Bharani of the month Chaitra is assumed to be the birthday of the goddess and all Bharani of the year (12 in all) are sacred. So also, the 10<sup>th</sup> day (pathamudayam) of the month of Vaishakha is important. It is also the commencement of the summer equinox.<sup>15</sup>

The favourite item, of worship for the serpent god is the *nooru-and-palu*. The *nooru-and-palu* is made out a paste of rice flavor, turmeric powder, sugar, and tender flowers of coconut areca nut prepared in tender coconut water and cow's milk. The *Sarpa* was given this preparation on *Ashlesha Nakshtra* of every month and most importantly in the month of *Ashwina*. The *Ashlesha Nakshtra* of *Ashwina* is supposed to be the birthday of the *Nagas*. The *Sarpamthuall* (serpent dance) under the priestly supervision of the pulluvan and pulluvathi, is offered on special occasions-generally intended for the prosperity of the family and occasionally for the atonement from the wrath of *Sarpas* (*sarpakpopam*)<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Nair PKB(1987)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid p.54

<sup>15</sup> Ibid p.60

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 61

## Ecological analysis of sacred groves

### Flora of sacred groves

Floristic analysis reveals that the sacred groves are rather rich, in their species composition. Analyses of the flora of the region is normally expressed by tabulating the ten largest families in the order of the number of species encountered and comparing with those of the adjacent regions, or of the counting as whole. Sacred groves are almost distributed along the entire length of the state and can be classified as coastal evergreens, low land evergreens, Myristica Swamps, disturbed evergreens and deciduous forests.<sup>17</sup> Probably sacred groves represent the characteristic vegetation of the area. As such, they are the last surviving patches of a large network of potential vegetation of the country. But there is loss of this remnant characteristic vegetation in the area due to the demand of agriculture and land-use patterns.

Based on the classification of champion (1936), Chandra Sekharan (1982) has grouped the forests of Kerala into Tropical West evergreen, Tropical Moist deciduous, Tropical Dry deciduous, mountain sub-tropical and Mountain Temperate Forests with climax, secondary and edaphic types within each of them. As far as low land are concerned, there are only two types such as low-level Evergreen Forest and Myristica Swamp Forest. These forests were mentioned to be spread over the entire length of the state.<sup>18</sup>

From grove to grove, it is not always the same species, which is dominant. These local variations reflect variable Edaphic and environmental conditions; topographic differences, climatic variations and varying degrees of human interference. Rapid changes in the plant community due to changes in land-use pattern even in the neighbourhood, as is seen in *Thavidissery Kavu* and *vallikkattu Kavu* reveals that evergreens forests are complex fragile ecosystems and very sensitive to disturbances.<sup>19</sup>

Groves are generally 13 to 20m tall. Wind is an important factor limiting the height of trees. If sheltered from wind, as in *KolaniKavu*, *IringoleKavu* and *Paekkavu* other groves can also produce large quantity of biomass, almost equal to or sometimes even greater than that of the evergreen formations described by Pascal(1988).<sup>20</sup>

The soil has high potential to support superior vegetation than what it actually bears now. Plantations of cash crops or intensive agro forests shall be raised adjacent to sacred groves, to avail maximum ecological utility since it is not possible to expand the groves in view of the increasing land hunger in the state.

With 419 medicinal plants, 163 timber species and 279 plants yielding minor forest produces, sacred groves are gene-bank of economically important plants. They contain 63 species, which are wild relatives of cultivars, and they provide ample scientific material for further research.

Although retrogression has been initiated in most of the groves and many plural regional elements have invaded them due to fragmentation and openings, these groves are the last remaining patches of vegetation in the lowlands. In Kerala, majority of the other low land forests have vanished. These pieces of forests vegetation will help us to understand the structure and dynamics of such ecosystems and reflect the potentiality of the soil if there are no other limiting factors. They act as scientific reservoirs and convey the suitable species each locality for further afforestation. Hence they have to be preserved and our traditional society deserves special respect for the wise stewardship of such areas, which we now seek to protect. When compared with the total number of groves that existed in the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century they had been reduced to 1.2% despite all religious protections. The habitats of the sacred groves need to be preserved against the rapid disappearance and retrogression as against the common belief that they are preserved intact. Their existence is endangered due to the rapid pace of deforestation, increasingly diverse land-use pattern, exploding population, decreasing religious beliefs etc. Survival of these groves cannot be ensured unless stringent protective measures are taken.

<sup>17</sup> Induchoodan, N C (1998)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid p.121

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 142

<sup>20</sup> Ibid 142

## CONCLUSION

The sacred groves of the Kerala (*kavu*) are fighting a losing battle for self-preservation. Today many of the groves do not possess the rare variety of plants and trees for which they were once famous. Those in need of them have removed plants with medicinal values without any effort of replenishment. Nowadays, due to shortage of land for cultivation, nobody is in the habit of planting a tree just because of their rare medicinal value unless he can get a financial gain out of it. The tendency of cut the existing trees either to give way for more profitable cultivation or for house construction. Even if there is a serpent grove in the property allotted to a member of the family through partition, he would try to get rid of the serpent by seeking the help of the priest from the Nambuthri *Illams*. So much so, that Kerala which was once famous for the abundance of greeneries around every house and sacred grove as part of all-important household is now being increasingly denuded of both of them. It is not unlikely that if the present trend continues the concept of '*Udyana*' will be relegated to the public parks and that of sacred groves to memories and their symbolic relics removed to the nearest temples.

The present source of strength of the groves, namely the myths around them and the belief arising out of them, may not be adequate to fight against their adversaries. Religious beliefs will have to reinforce and supplemented secular folklore, which can be advanced on scientific ground, to pave the *Kavus* regain the traditional respect and reverence once again.

Under the pressure of modernization, the survival of groves will eventually depend on their secular social functions. At present groves are conceptualized primarily as sacred places of Hindus. Their contributions to ecology are not well known. These groves make a variety of contributions to man and society. It includes not only family and social integration but also the preservation of the eco-systems including the water table.

The younger generation growing up under the malignant influence of materialism may not accept the contribution of the sacred groves. But they cannot dispute the scientific contributions if only they are conscientised in the matter properly and effectively. To achieve this objective, it is suggested that school textbook should contain lessons describing the ecological and environmental contributions of groves. The Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad (K.S.S.P) and Kerala Associations for Non-formal Education (K.A.N.F.E.D) at the state level, the Ministry of Environment of Forests at the central level, and the Indian Association for the Advancement of Science, New Delhi and various other Non-Governmental Organizations could very effectively promote the work of the population on the need to preserve the groves.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Freeman J.R, "Gods, Groves and Culture of Nature in Kerala", *Modern Asian Studies*, Cambridge University Press, 1999
- Freeman, J.R: Gods, Groves and the culture of nature in Kerala", *Modern Asian studies*, CUP, 1999.
- Induchoodan, N.C, *Ecological Studies of the Sacred Groves of Kerala*, (unpublished PhD thesis), Department of Botany, Central University, Pondicherry, 1998.
- Jain, S.K (ed) "Glimpses of Indian Ethnobotany", New Delhi, Oxford and IBH, 1981.
- Kalam, M.A: *Sacred groves in Kodagu-district of Karnataka (south India): A historical study: Pandy papers in social sciences*, No.21, Pondicherry, French Institute.
- Menon, Achyutha, E: "Kali worship in Kerala (Malayalam)", Madras, University of Madras, 1943.
- Nair P.K.B, *Religion, Mythology and the Eco-system: A study of certain Beliefs and Practices among the forward Communities and their impact on the system*, prepared for Department of Environment and Forests, Govt: of India, New Delhi, 1987.
- Unnikrishnan E: *sacred groves in North Kerala: An Eco-Folklore Study*, (Malayalam) Jeevarekha, Thrissur, Kerala, 1995.
- Vishnu Namboodri, M.V: "Mantrikavidyayum Mantrevadapattukalam" (Malayalam) Kottayam, NBT, 1979.