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SACRED GROVES OF PUDUCHERRY

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SACRED GROVES OF PUDUCHERRY

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Introduction:

Sacred groves represent ancient Indian Conservation tradition, protected by local people out of reverence and respect, fear, sentiment and belief system. They are the home of the local flora and fauna, a veritable gene pool and a mini-biosphere reserve. Within these groves are locked ancient secrets of herbals and traditional medicine and primitive practices.

In India, sacred groves play an important role in the conservation of Biodiversity. Sacred groves are the remnants of forest patches protected based on the religious beliefs. In India, so far about 13,720 sacred groves are reported from various states. Sacred groves have existed in India from time immemorial as patches of densely wooded areas and it preserve many rare and endemic wild plant and animal species.

Sacred groves are our rich heritage and play an important role in the religious and socio cultural life of the local people. Hunting and logging are usually prohibited within these patches. Other forms of forest utilization like collection of fire wood and minor forest produce are sometimes allowed on a sustainable basis.

Sacred groves are ecosystems by themselves and perform all basic ecological functions. Many endangered and rare species of plants and animals are protected in the sacred groves, and hence they serve as the repositories of the biological wealth of the nation.

Indian sacred groves are sometimes associated with temples, shrines or with burial grounds. Typically such groves are associated with the concept of a presiding deity. While most of the sacred groves deities are associated with local Hindu Gods, also based on local religion and folk regions (like the folk deities Aiyandar and Amman), there are over 1000 deities associated with sacred groves in the states of Kerala and Karnataka alone.

Sacred groves are scattered all over the country and are referred to by different names in different parts of India (for example Kavu in Kerala, Devaravanam in Andhra, orans in Rajasthan). The east coast of Tamil Nadu has about 72 sacred groves which comprises of a variety of vegetation such as trees, shrubs, lianas, herbs, epiphytes, tuberous plants. Some of the important groves of the region include the Puthupet grove having more than 28 hectares (Fig-7.), the Oorani grove dedicated to Goddess Selliamman, the Olagapuram grove with 136 species in 121 genera and 58 families. The other prominent Groves include are the Kizhnbhuvanagiri grove covering an area of 1.1 hectares dedicated to the deity Udaiyarappan.

These sacred groves harbor Tropical Dry Evergreen Forests (TDEF's) which are unique and restricted geographical distribution. These are unique low density forests, occurring in the drier area of Coromandel Coast of India.

Present Study:

The biocultural perspectives and plant diversity of sacred groves in and around Puducherry in a sector of Coromandel coast of South India covering Marakkanam-Puducherry-Cuddalore and Villupuram region was investigated. Though 163 sacred groves were enumerated initially, only 15 groves were selected for detailed study. In addition to the 15 groves, two coastal sacred groves viz. Manapet (0.6 ha) and Nallavadu (1.2 ha) are also studied in detail. Nine of them fall within Puducherry territory, four each in the intervening pockets of Cuddalore and Villupuram districts of Tamil Nadu state. Krishnavaram (8.8 ha) is the largest one, while six are medium sized (1.12 ha to 4.92 ha) and other ten are smaller groves (<1.0 ha). All are surrounded by crop fields or plantations, dotting the agricultural landscape and hence called "Marudham groves" except

Nallavadu sacred grove which is purely coastal and called as "Neythal grove" (Fig-5.).

Restriction on tree felling, hunting of animals and collection of fire-wood are common to most of the groves. Beliefs on earning the wrath of infuriated deities if the trees are harmed is wide-spread. Folklores /tales glorifying the virtues of God are associated with all the groves. People repose immense faith in God and are afraid of supernatural which indirectly contributes to conservation of Biodiversity in these sacred groves. Nevertheless, signs of weakening of belief-system and violations are rampant in all the groves. Temple complexes are increasing and the tree cover is going on reducing.

Aiyanar is the presiding deity in 13 groves, Amman in three groves (Fig-1) and Kutiandavar in one grove. A stone slab with the Aiyanar in the middle flanked by his two consorts, Poorani and Porkalai represent the main idol. It is installed in the open on the floor in two groves under the huge trees reminiscent of nature worship of primitive societies.

In three groves, it is raised on platforms. In the rest temples or shrines of varying complexities exist, of the 17 groves Sedarapet with its aniconic character and close tree cover comes closer to an informal grove. Thennampakkam is dedicated to the memory of Saint AzhagarSidhar, hence a memorial grove. Recently concrete idols of Aiyanar, Poorani and Porkalai were constructed outside the Saint AzhagarSidharsamsdhi (Fig-3.). All others are formal groves since the idol worship and shrine construction is prevalent in varying extent.

In all the groves, together measuring 29.87 ha, 251 plant species belonging to 176 genera and 62 families were inventoried. Of these 136 were woody taxa and six are lianas. Despite the species diversity, three groves can be classified as mono-species and others are mixed composition. Though mono-species groves were dominated by *Borassus flabellifer* (eg. Sandhikuppam, Krishnavaram and Moorthikuppam) or *Tamarindus indica* (Thennampakkam) and other trees like *Azadirachta indica* were equally important to the extent of becoming co-dominant. There were sizable population of other trees too. No one species was dominant uniformly across the groves. The groves at Kumalam

and Ramanathapuram(Fig-2) were characterized by luxurious growth of *Glycosmismauritiana* shrubs in which isolated trees were inter spread with.

Natural vegetation along the Coromandel coast occurs in patches of Tropical Dry Evergreen Forests (TDEF's) or scrub woodlands. The following groves viz, Sedarapet, Mangalam(Fig-6.), Karasur, Ramanathapuram, Manapet and Kumalam shared both evergreen and deciduous elements. Since this region was covered by evergreen forests in the past, these groves may be relicts of erstwhile formations with reduced species richness with a large proportion of ligneous and armed species. Krishnavaram is a scrub jungle.

Degradation of vegetation as a result of continued human interference is evident in all the groves. Sand quarrying, erection of elaborate temple complexes, votive offering in the form of concrete structures or idols(Fig-4.), facility for cause way/ foot path and encroachment of the grove proper for housing/agricultural purposes/ for conducting annual festival are major forms of human impacts. Frequent visits of devotees and grand celebrations of annual festivals or individual ceremonies like tonsuring, marriage functions were other contributory factors. Natural calamities in the form of cyclonic storms have uprooted trees occasionally (e.g. Thane cyclone).

The groves are not exactly the miniature of their original forest types. As they stand today, they cannot become typically tall thick woody stands as the pressure are manifold. Despite the species diversity, they are

dominated by secondary species, uncharacteristic of climax vegetation. To make it worse several of the trees are ageing and old specimens, giving way to coppicing.

Conclusion:

It is confirmed that the existence of rich biodiversity in the sacred groves and justifies the ecological prudence of the agricultural peasants of the past. Their cultural traditions have protected scores of plants of conservation values either within the relict patches or in the anthrotropic strands. A treasure trove of biodiversity has been discovered in the form of sacred groves and they craves for immediate conservation from the onslaught of the self- centered civilized society.

For reviving the sacred groves present in and around Puducherry, all the stake holders like forest department, village panchayat members, research scholars, students and media should be involved. Action plan on conservation of sacredgroves have to be prepared and implemented immediately. Awareness activities are being undertaken by the state government in educational institutions and exhibitions, festivals are to be organized to create awareness.

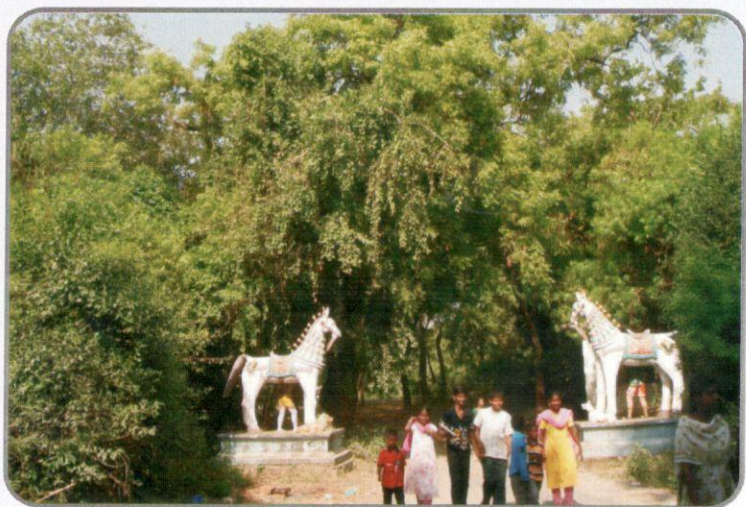


Fig-4. Votive offerings in Thennampakkam sacred grove



Fig-5. Coastal sacred grove of Nallavadu

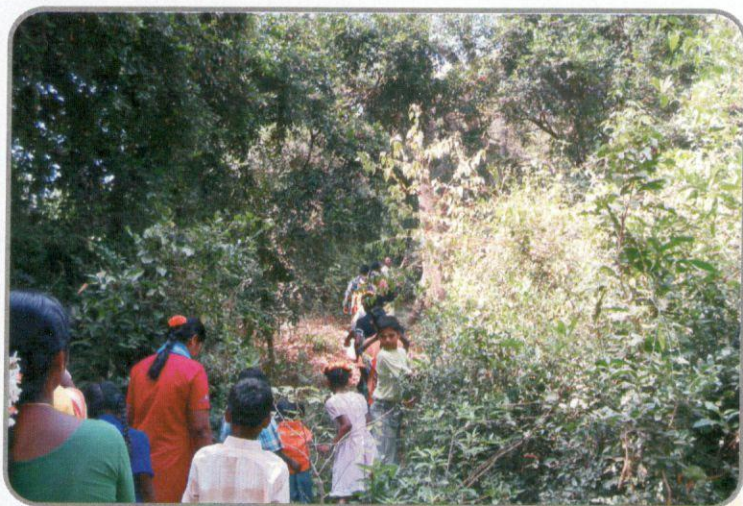


Fig-6 .Mangalam sacred grove

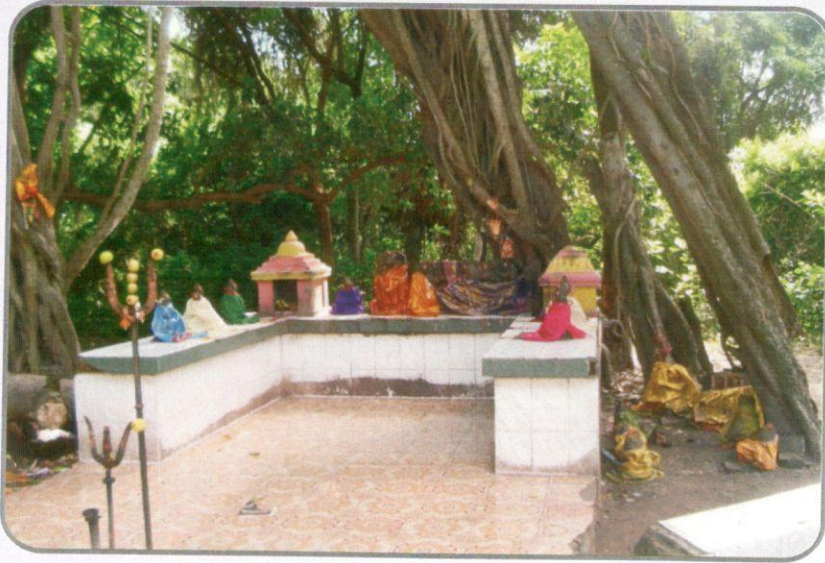


Fig-1 .Santhikuppam sacred grove Nelavazhi Amman



Fig-2. Ramanathapuram sacred grove



Fig-3. Thennampakkam sacred grove



Fig-7. Puthupet sacred grove



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