
TRADITION AS CONSERVATION: THE CULTURAL, HISTORICAL AND ECOLOGICAL ROLE OF SACRED GROVES IN KERALA

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KEY WORDS	ABSTRACT
Sacred Groves, Traditional Beliefs, Ecology, Conservation, Preservation, Urban Growth, Rituals, Customs	Sacred groves are found in every parts of the world, but in India their roots go back to ancient times. In Kerala, these groves have long reflected a close relationship proximity between nature, culture, and spirituality. Preserved through local beliefs, rituals and customs, they have survived for generations as community protected spaces. In spite of their religious importance, these groves have also functioned as conventional system of environmental protection. This study examines how sacred groves in Kerala have assisted to preserve biodiversity through indigenous customs, myths and ritual practices. It also explores their role in protecting traditional knowledge, medicinal plants, and rare species that remained protected because of firm cultural beliefs and social prohibitions. At the same time, the study highlights the deep link between people and nature embedded within Kerala's cultural traditions. However, rapid urban growth, changing social values, and developmental pressures have caused the gradual disappearance of many sacred groves in recent past. By studying their cultural and ecological significance, the argues that these traditional conservation practices still offer valuable lessons for environmental sustainability

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today. The study therefore focuses the necessity to protect sacred groves not as forgotten remnants of the ancient past, but as living cultural landscapes that continue to strengthen a balanced relationship between humans and environment.

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Introduction

Sacred groves represent one of the oldest forms of community-based conservation in India, where religious beliefs and cultural traditions have long contributed to the protection of natural ecosystems. In Kerala, these groves, locally known as *kavu*, occupy a unique position in the cultural landscape, reflecting the close relationship between faith, folklore, history, and biodiversity. For centuries, local communities have preserved these forest patches through rituals, taboos, and customary practices rather than through formal legal institutions. As a result, sacred groves have served not only as centres of religious worship but also as important reservoirs of ecological diversity and indigenous knowledge. This study examines the cultural, historical, and ecological significance of sacred groves in Kerala, with particular emphasis on their role as traditional systems of environmental conservation. It also explores the contemporary challenges threatening their survival and highlights the continuing relevance of these sacred landscapes for sustainable conservation in the modern era.

2. Sacred Groves: Origins, Meaning and Ecological Significance

Sacred groves are usually regarded as living vestiges of the once-extensive evergreen forests that covered Kerala in earlier times. These groves serve as natural shelters for a comprehensive of endemic species, including flora and fauna, plants with medicinal properties, reptiles' birds' small mammals and butterflies. Further their ecological significance, sacred groves have long been fundamental to the conservation of cultural traditions and religious ethos. They are in regard to as the habitation of

deities, and rituals such as the *Nagatharakal*³ and the renowned *Theyyam* of North Malabar are closely related with these spaces. Traditionally, many sacred groves also include a pond, further increasing their ecological and cultural significance. Sacred groves are patches of pristine forest, protected for generations by local communities because of their deep cultural and religious matters. These spaces are protected through beliefs, taboos, and rituals related with deities believed to live within them.

Every grove carries its own stories, legends, and myths, all of which connect the identity and meaning of the dwelling place. The religious myths and cults, folklore and beliefs, focused on the groves are many. These are still seen in the form of folk plays, and dances, which arouse rituals and ceremonies in propitiation of deities and spirits.⁴ More than just cultural sites, sacred groves stand as natural repository of biodiversity. In spite of increasing pressure on forests, many groves continue to protect scarce and precious plant species. Studies have shown that many medicinal plants, now rare in nearby forests, still thrive within these conserved patches. In many cases, endangered and endemic species find refuge here.

The constant survival of sacred groves is closely linked to the beliefs and customs of the communities that preserve them. Religious values and taboos have played a crucial role in ensuring the sustainable use and conservation of local *flora* and *fauna*. However, overtime, changes in lifestyle, belief systems, and land use have begun to affect these groves-

³The sacred place dedicated to serpent gods commonly found in traditional homes and sacred groves of Kerala.

⁴Mohan. C. N. & Gangaprasad, A, The Sacred Groves of Kerala and their Conservation in National workshop in Sacred Groves: Kozhikode, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, Department of Forest and Wildlife, Government of Kerala, 2004, p.45

altering their vegetation, structure, and the way people perceive them. Understanding the current condition and function of sacred groves is therefore essential. A holistic approach is needed to assess their ecological significance and to develop effective conservation strategies. The original forest communities when they started settled agriculture by clearing forest lands, used to keep tiny portions of forests set apart for the gods and their ancestors who are believed to protect their crops. These have become sacred groves.⁵ Their practice of establishing forest deities and stone edifices representing their forefathers are still being continued.⁶

In recent years, people have shown a growing interest in safeguarding sacred groves, and this concern is steadily gaining momentum. Community trusts are also stepping forward to support their protection. The present study highlights that a well-knit social framework has developed around these groves- rooted in faith and tradition-while also contributing to social harmony, livelihoods, conservation practices, and aesthetic values. The present study validated and proved the fact that due to faiths, taboos and beliefs over years, the natives and residents of the locality have developed a fondness towards the temple and the forest of sacred groves. The local people are widely accepted that their subsistence, security and prosperity are interdependent to the boons of the deity of the *Kavu*.

In the cultural landscape of Kerala, tradition has long functioned as a powerful mechanism of conservation. Sacred groves – locally known as *Kavu*– are small forest patches preserved in the name of deities, ancestral

⁵ J.R. Freeman, *Gods, Groves and the Culture of Nature in Kerala*, Modern Asian Studies, 33(2): 1999, p.257

⁶ Chand Basha, *Sacred Groves of Kerala*, A status Report: Regional Centre National Afforestation and Eco-Development Board, University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore, 1997-98 p.3

spirits, and serpent gods. These groves represent an indigenous ecological ethics where religion, folklore, and environmental stewardship are deeply intertwined. Certain stories also reveal the link between sacred groves and historical events and personalities. Long before modern conservation policies emerged, communities in Malabar protected biodiversity spiritual reverence and customary practices.

3. Traditional Beliefs, Taboos and Ecological Protection

Sacred groves in Malabar are closely associated with ritual traditions such as serpent worship (*Nagaradhana*) and *Theyyam* performances. There is a popular opinion that taboos are simply superstitions. Case studies uncover that villagers in overall are ignorant of the ecological consequences of *kavus*. Nonetheless, they guard the *kavus* because of their belief in prohibitions. Thus taboos get ecological prominence. The major ecological value is related to water. There is famous adage in Malayalam: '*Kavutheendalle, Kulam Vattum*.⁷' A initial assessment is enough to show that the field capacity of a portion of forest is the source of water for springs feeding the nearby ponds and the streams generating from it.⁸ Another belief is related with the belief that Kavus are natural environment of snakes and other animals.

The ruin of *Kavu* would result in the fury of the Snake God which would causes infertility and leprosy in the family.⁹ The sacred grove is considered the home of deities, and any commotion believed to invite spiritual unrest. But in the changing social order we cannot rely on taboos for the

⁷If the sacred grove is disturbed, the pond will dry up.

⁸M. Jayarajan, *Sacred Groves in North Malabar*, Discussion Paper Series No.92, Kerala Research Program on Local Level Development, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, 2004, p.36S

⁹ Ibid

preservation of sacred groves. It is important that every endeavor should be made to make people aware of the necessity for the preservation of our bio-resources. In the process of evolution of human cultures from the hunting-gathering stages to pastoral and settled agriculture, the belief and ritual practices were shaped, modified and structured in the backdrop of a stratified society and where ritual occasions are mentioned by sacrifices to a cult object.¹⁰ Many groves are attached to family lineages- *tharavadu* and local temples. Festivals like *Theyyam* are performed within or near these groves reinforcing their sacred status. Community norms prohibit cutting trees, hunting, or altering the land within the grove.

In Malabar, many sacred groves are closely associated with family lineages (*tharavadu*) and nearby temples. In several traditional households, the grove is believed to be the dwelling place of family deities, serpent gods, or local guardian spirits. Because of this belief, the grove is not considered an ordinary patch of land or forest; rather, it is treated as a sacred and spiritually significant space within the community. Most of the families carry out annual rituals and offerings in these groves. Rituals such as serpent worship, special prayers, and annual rituals and practices are often done by members of the *Tharavadu*.

Through these practices, the sacred groves become a beloved part of the religious and cultural identity of the family and the local community. Cutting trees, disturbing the soil, or harming animals within the grove is conventionally regarded as a violation of religious principles norms and an act that may invite divine wrath. Consequently, these areas remain protected through strict cultural taboos and social norms. Because of such beliefs and practices have been passed down to posterity, sacred groves

¹⁰ Romila Tapar, *From Lineage to State: Social Formation of the Mid-first Millennium BC, in the Ganga Valley*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999. p.32

have survived as preserved the patches of natural vegetation. Likewise, religious identity and traditional practices have played a significant role in preserving biodiversity and maintaining ecological balance in Kerala.

4. Rituals and Religious Practices Associated with Sacred Groves

Variety of religious rituals and cultural ceremonies are closely linked with sacred groves in the Kerala. These practices played a significant role in maintaining the sacred status and social significance of the groves. In many villages, sacred groves function as important centers of traditional religious life. Festivals, seasonal rituals and offerings are often conducted within or near these groves. Through these ceremonies, the belief that the grove is the dwelling place of deities and spiritual forces is continuously reinforced within the community. As a result, the grove is treated with great care and respect.

One of the most prominent ritual traditions connected with sacred groves is *Theyyam*. Many *Theyyam* performances take place in and around sacred groves or shrines associated with them. During *Theyyam* rituals, performers represented local deities and narrate myths, legends and historical memories of the region. The faith among the devotees that the performance of *Theyyam* in the form of *Vishnumurthi* and *Bhagavathi* will safeguard them from epidemic diseases and natural calamities.¹¹ These ceremonies attract large gatherings of people and strengthen the spiritual and cultural importance of the grove. In addition to *Theyyam*, rituals such as serpent worship, special offerings, and annual prayers are also conducted in some groves. These practices symbolize the close relationship between humans, nature, and the spiritual world.

¹¹U.M. Chandrasekhara, *Cultural and Conservation Values of Sacred Groves in Kerala*, India, International Journal of Ecological and Environmental Sciences, National Institute of Ecology, New Delhi, 2011, p.146

Generally, the deities located in the groves are of indigenous character belonging to a single community or a deity common to several communities living in contiguous region. Some of the sacred groves could have originated in a secular background with the intension of preserving economically valuable trees/climbers/plants, which are endogamous to the locality.¹²Socio-political roles were hardly looked into.¹³Through the continuation of such rituals and ceremonies, sacred groves are not viewed merely as patches of forest but as holy spaces that must be protected. In this way ritual practices have played a significant role in preserving these groves and maintaining ecological balance in the Malabar region.

Sacred groves in Kerala are traditionally protected not only through religious beliefs but also through strong social regulations within the community. These unwritten rules and customary norms strictly prohibit activities such as cutting trees, hunting animals, collecting firewood, or altering the natural landscapes within the grove.

In many villages, the sacred grove is regarded as a common heritage of the community or of a particular *tharavadu*¹⁴. Therefore, any act that disturbs the grove considered socially unacceptable and sometimes even believed to bring misfortune or divine punishment. Because of these beliefs, people

¹²E.D, Kingand Israel Oliver, *Role of Sacred Groves in Bio-diversity Conservation* In: National Workshop on Sacred Groves: Kozhikkode, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, Department of Forest and wildlife, Government of Kerala,2004, p.3

¹³ Emma Tomaline, *Biodivinity and Biodiversity: The Limits to Religious Environmentalism*, Routledge, New Delhi,2016, p.161

¹⁴ The term *Taravadu* is a derived from two words 'Tara' and 'Pad', the former meaning a portion of a village or a unit of an administrative organization of civil and military purposes and the 'vadu' is a corrupt form of a 'Pad' meaning power rank or authority Quated in K.K.N. Kurup, in *Land Monopoly and Agrarian System in Sosuth Canara*, University of Calicut, 1981, p.1

avoid interfering with the natural environment of the grove. Usually, there is faith that some deities of connected with sacred grove serve as the guards of the presiding deity of the prominent sacred groves.

The present study indicates that sacred groves of Kerala represent community conserved biodiversity areas with varied degree of ecological and socio-cultural dimensions. It may also be noted that even as the social change occur, the revivals of cultural heritage – one of the important ecosystem services of sacred groves, can act to support the conservation and restoration of grove Community elders and traditional authorities often play an important role in ensuring that these rules are respected. Through social pleasure and collective responsibility, the community the grove in its natural condition. Such social regulations function as an informal but effective system of environmental protection. In the earlier times, modern environmental laws were enacted, these community customs helped to protect biodiversity and maintain ecological balance in the Malabar region. These cultural prohibitions act as informal environmental laws. The belief system thus becomes a protective cover for nature.

5. Ecological Functions and Biodiversity Conservation

From an ecological viewpoint, sacred groves act as biodiversity hotspots in Malabar's agrarian landscape. Sacred groves often conserve rare medicinal plants, endemic species, and old growth trees that have disappeared from nearby areas due to agriculture and rapid urbanization. These dense patches regulate temperature and humidity, acting as natural climate stabilizers within villages. Many groves contain ponds streams or natural springs. By preventing deforestation, communities ensured ground water recharge and soil conservation. Many sacred groves hold water

source in the forms of ponds, streams or wells.¹⁵ Birds' reptiles' amphibians, and small mammals find refuge within these protected areas. Thus, sacred groves function as ecological islands sustaining life amidst human settlements.

Sacred groves have a long and significant presence in the cultural and ecological landscape of the Malabar region of northern Kerala. These groves, locally known as *kavu* are small patches of forest that have been preserved for centuries due to religious beliefs and traditional practices. In districts such as Kozhikode, Kannur and Kasargod, sacred groves were once commonly found near traditional homes, temples, and village settlements. In Malabar context, sacred groves are closely linked with local traditions, rituals, and folklore. Many of these groves are believed to be the dwelling places of serpent deities', ancestral spirits or local guardian gods. Because of these beliefs, people treat these areas with great respect and avoid disturbing the natural environment within them. In Kerala, in the seventeenth century transformation of land specifically mentioned serpents residing there.¹⁶

Ritual traditions such as *Theyyam* are also strongly connected with sacred groves in northern Kerala. In many places, *Theyyam* performances take place in or near these groves, where the performer represents a deity believed to reside in the sacred forest. Through such rituals, myths, legends and historical memories of the region are passed down from one generation to another.

In addition, many traditional households in Malabar maintained *Sarpa*

¹⁵M.C, Malhotra, *Cultural and ecological Dimensions of Sacred Groves in Kerala*, Indian National Science Academy, New Delhi,2001, p.56

¹⁶ William Logan, *Malabar Manual*, Government Press, Madras, p. cxxxiii

*Kavus*¹⁷ within their compounds. These small forest patches were protected as sacred spaces dedicated to serpent worship. Moreover, cults adhered to these deities through a combination of stones and specific trees assembled in a grove are widespread at all levels of society.¹⁸ Such practices helped preserve natural vegetation and provided habitat for various plant and animal species. Thus, in Malabar region, sacred groves represent a unique combination of culture, religion, and ecology. They illustrate how traditional belief system and community practices have played a vital role in conserving nature for generations. The socio-cultural perspective of sacred groves in Kerala is widely disseminated in its inter folk communications were festivals¹⁹.

Sacred groves demonstrate that conservation is not merely a scientific concept but also a cultural practice. Moral ecology protection arises from ethical and spiritual obligations rather than state enforcement. Community participation demands local people become custodians of biodiversity. Sustainable co-existence balances agricultural expansion with ecological preservation. It was a common practice in many villages to erect a thin wood post in the middle of each paddy field and tie a coconut to each such post symbolizing the deity of the nearby sacred grove to protect their crops from pests, diseases and natural calamities. This indicates that sacred groves and agriculture system in rural Kerala are closely linked with each other.²⁰ The historical dimension of sacred groves is deeply connected to

¹⁷Small Sacred patch of forest dedicated to serpent worship, commonly found in Kerala, often associated with traditional beliefs, ecology and ancestral rituals.

¹⁸Gilles, Tarabout. *Sacrifier et donner a voir en pays Malabar*, Orient, New Delhi, 2015, p.65

¹⁹Aravindakshan K.M, *Interfolk Communications and Integrating Interactions in Folk Festivals-A Case study*, Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Mysore, 2007, p.25

²⁰ Rohini Krishnan. R, *Kavus (Sacred Groves) of Kerala*, Unpublished Ph.D Thesis,

local history and community. Exploring the unique history associated with each grove helps us understand how these sacred spaces came into existence,

6. Contemporary Threats to Sacred Groves

Despite their importance, sacred groves face many challenges and threats. Despite their ecological and cultural importance, sacred groves in Malabar region face several challenges in the modern period. Rapid social, economic and cultural changes have created new pressures on these traditionally protected forest patches. One major challenge is urbanization and development. As villages expand and land value increases many sacred groves are being reduced in size or cleared for construction, agriculture or commercial purposes. In some cases, the grove land is converted for housing or other development projects. Another important issue is the decline of traditional belief systems and rituals. Earlier strong religious faith and regular rituals ensured the protection of these groves.

However, with modernization and changing lifestyles, many of these practices are no longer strictly followed, weakening the traditional protection mechanisms. The breakdown of the traditional *tharavadu* system has also contributed to this problem. In the past, large joint families collectively took responsibility for maintaining the sacred groves. The decline of the Chera rule in the first half of the twelfth century resulted in the emergence of feudal set up most vividly manifested in the areas of land control and processes of agrarian production. The feudal households functioned as important land controlling agencies.²¹ Today, as family structures change and property is divided among individuals, the

Pondicherry University, 2019. p.541

²¹ M.R. Raghava Varier & Rajan Gurukul, *Keralacharithram*, (Mal) Vallathol Vidyapeetam, Sukapuram, 1992, p.56

collective responsibility for protecting these spaces has diminished. In addition, lack of awareness and legal protection in some areas further threatens the survival of sacred groves. Without proper conservation measures, these valuable ecological and cultural sites may gradually disappear.

Therefore, preserving sacred groves in recent period needs not only respect for traditional beliefs but also increased awareness, community participation, and effective conservation efforts. One of the primary challenges facing sacred groves in Malabar today is the gradual decline in traditional ritual practices and belief systems. In the past, these groves were protected mainly because people believed they were the dwelling places of deities, serpent spirits, or ancestral powers. Ritual such as serpent worship, annual offerings, and community ceremonies strengthened the sacred status of these forests.

However, with modernization, urbanization, and changes in the pattern of social life, some of these traditional practices have slowly and gradually weakened. The seeds of destruction lie in greed, not the need.²² Younger generations are often not familiar with the rituals connected with sacred groves and in many families the customs that were once carefully preserved are no longer practiced regularly. Another important factor is the decline of the traditional *tharavadu* or joint family system. In ancient past, large extended families took responsibility for maintaining the grove and organizing rituals. As families became smaller and ownership shifted, this collective responsibility has been gradually gone. As belief in the sacred nature of these groves' declines, the cultural prohibitions that once protected them also weaker. This sometimes, leads to neglect, land

²² Chandran. M.D, et.al, The Sacred Groves of South India: Ecology, Traditional Communities and Religious Change, Social Compass, 1998, p.218

conservation, or destruction of these natural patches. Therefore, the weakening of ritual traditions and belief systems creates serious challenges to the survival of sacred groves and the ecological and cultural importance they threat to the survival of sacred groves and the ecological and cultural values they represent. The sacred grove was often considered the spiritual centre of the family, and its maintenance was viewed as a shared duty of all family members.

7. Land Reforms, Economic Change and Commercial Pressures

Rituals, offerings and festivals connected with the grove were organized by the *tharavadu*, which helped preserve both the cultural traditions and the natural environment of the grove. The first change came with the introduction of the land reform by the First Communist regime in 1957, and the historic implementation such as distribution of surplus land till the mid-1970s, that cause large scale fracture of land. Many sacred groves belonging to upper castes were forced to give their land and the peasants receiving it cleared such lands to commercial farming.²³

Another important factor is financial element which played a significant role in the loss of sacred groves. The rise of land prices in Kerala compelled families then cleared the sacred groves for building houses or in order to sell the nearby piece of lands. Migration from Kerala to other states and abroad also compelled people to clear the sacred groves persists in their courtyard. To prevent deities' wrath the emigrants often cleared their deserted groves with the suitable religious rituals supplied by Hindu priests.²⁴ Myths and taboos connected with the deity and the sacred groves

²³Catrien Noterman, et.al, The Changing Landscape of Sacred Groves in Kerala (India): A Critical View on the Role of Religion in Nature Conservation, in Religion and Nature in a Global World, Special issue Religions, 9 April 2016, p.4

²⁴*Ibid* p.65

give protection to the grove from human touch. But wherever their affect has weakened, the sacred groves are under threat irrespective of the significance of presiding deity. The new generation tends to look down at these rituals feel embarrassed of participating in those activities. Rationalist thought and campaigns against superstitions have also played their part in the loss protection of *kavus*.²⁵

However, with social and economic changes in modern times, the joint family system has gradually broken down. Families have become smaller and more nuclear, and ancestral properties have been divided among individual members. As a result, the collective responsibility that once ensured the protection of sacred groves has weakened. When the land surrounding a grove is divided among different owners the grove itself may be neglected, reduced in size, or sometimes even cleared for other economic purposes. Thus, the fragmentation of joint family structures has indirectly contributed to the decline and disappearance of some sacred groves in the Malabar region. Commercial land use has become one of the major challenges to sacred groves in Kerala. With the population explosion, urbanization, and the huge demand for land several areas that were once conserved as sacred groves are now under pressure for commercial development.

Long before, religious practices and community traditions prevented people from using these lands for financial purposes. Sacred groves were revered as holy spaces, and any attempt to cut trees or alter the land was strictly avoided. However, changing economic priorities and the increasing the value of lands have sped up these traditional restrictions.

With changing economic priorities and the rising market value of land,

²⁵M. Jayarajan, *Op.cit.* p.39s

many of the traditional restrictions that once protected sacred groves have gradually weakened. Activities that were once avoided out of respect for these sacred spaces are now increasingly overlooked in the pursuit of economic gain. As a result, several sacred groves are being reduced in size or partially cleared to make way for roads, buildings, and other commercial activities. Most of the landowners begin to view these groves as unused land that could bring profit if converted for others purposes.

8. Conclusion

Sacred groves in the Kerala region represent remarkable examples of how traditional faiths beliefs and cultural practices can contribute to environmental conservation. For centuries, these groves survived because of religious faith, community customs, and social norms that prevented the destruction of nature. As a result, they acted as important reservoirs, of biodiversity, and as symbols of the harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world system. However, in the recent past, sacred groves undergo many threats, such as urbanization, commercial land use, the decline of ritual customs and the disappearance of joint family practices. These steps weaken cultural mechanisms that once ensured the conservation of these sacred spaces.

Therefore, protecting sacred groves today demands combined efforts. Along with respecting traditional beliefs and cultural values, there must also be greater and general environmental awareness, community participation, and supportive mechanism for conservation policies. By endorsing both their cultural heritage and ecological significance, sacred groves can continue to play a pivotal role in protecting biodiversity and conserving ecological balance in the Kerala. The historical landmark of sacred groves is strongly connected to local history and community.

Exploring the uniqueness of history related with each grove helps us to

make out how these sacred places came into existence, the communities connected to them, and the ritual matters they continue to perform. Such a policy also opens a close affinity between ritual practices and the collective memories shaped by historical events that contributed to the foundation of these sacred landscapes. At the same time, study of sacred groves provides valuable insight into broader and wider landscape transformations and social changes that appear through their creation and management at the local level. As social and economic systems continue to change, communities and stakeholders are increasingly showing great interest in protecting, conserving and restoring these sacred spaces because of their cultural and spiritual significance.

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