Traditional worshiping plants from selected sacred groves of Kozhikode District, Kerala, India

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Abstract

The present paper highlights the religious importance of sacred plants, which are documented from two different sacred groves such as Kanangad kavu and Kavumkara of Kozhikode district, Kerala. During the study, there are about 20 species of plants belonging to 20 genera and 14 families were documented. The religious potentialities of these plants and their role in worshiping god/goddess were also tabulated. The present study also highlights the importance of conserving such sacred patches is an urgent need, because the changes in social belief, modernization and erosion of cultural practices are some of the major factors contributing towards degradation of the ancient institutional heritage.

Keywords: Religious importance, Sacred plants, Kozhikode district, Kerala.

Introduction

Sacred groves are sanctified patches of forests protected by the strength of religious beliefs as abode of Gods and Goddesses. It is believed that the existence of sacred forest dates back to several thousands of years when human society was in the primitive stage of development. Sacred groves are also considered as a social institution or a part of the taboos that evolved historically over several generations to provide a site for culturally crucial social interactions. The ancestral practices of animism with the central focus on the worship of forest patches regarded them as the sacred abode of various Gods/deities. However, conservation practices and control over extractive activities in sacred groves vary in different communities and regions. Sacred groves also perform several ecological functions, which can directly or indirectly help in the maintenance of ecosystem health of all interacting landscape units. A sacred grove with their complex array of interaction influences the flora and fauna of the region as well as the microclimate of that locality. Generally sacred groves are believed to be a treasure house of medicinal, rare and endemic plants, refugia for relic flora of a region and also as centers of seed dispersal.

Sacred groves are a very ancient and widespread phenomenon in the old world cultures. Such groves are one of the finest examples of traditional in situ conservation practices, which dates much prior to the modern concept of wildlife reserves. These are patches of natural near-climax pristine vegetation of trees and associate groups of organisms, managed as a part of local cultural tradition. The sacred groves are the representative of climax vegetation and exhibit the diversity of species such as trees, climbers, epiphytes and other shade loving herbs. Their plant wealth and conservation potential were impressive enough to acknowledge them as ‘minibiosphere reserves’. The people worshiped the sacred trees which are associated with sacred forests. These trees are either medicinal or edible plant species and they are protected by the indigenous people because of their cultural and religious importance. Taboos and myths attributed with the sacred groves also protect them from anthropogenic disturbances. Sacred groves act as a sort of insurance against emergencies; in cases of famine or other natural disasters food and materials may be collected from the grove to ensure survival.

Materials and methods

Study area: The present study is confined to two unexplored sacred groves such as Kanangattukavu and Kavumkara in Kozhikode district, Kerala. Kozhikode also known as Calicut, is a city in the state of Kerala in Southern India on the Malabar coast. The city of Kozhikode is 410 kilometers north of the state capital Thiruvananthapuram. It is located at approximately 11.25°N 75.77°E, in which the rainy season is during the South West Monsoon, which sets in the first week of June and extends up to September. The North East Monsoon extends from the second half of October through November. The average annual rainfall is 3266 mm and the best weather is found in towards the end of the year, in December (Figure-1 A-B).

Kanangad kavu: Kanangattukavu is one of the sacred groves located in Kozhikode District. It is characterized by the increased diversity of shrub and herb species. This sacred grove is located on the South-East region of the Ramanattukara municipality and covers an area of approximately 0.121 ha. This sacred portion of land is devoted to snakes; hence, this is regarded as a ‘Nagakavu’. Kanangattukavu is maintained by the members of Kanangad family generation after generation. They
conduct Sakthiyam and Kavutheendal in each year to please the ‘Nagaraja’ (Figure-2A).

**Kavumkara:** Kavumkara sacred grove is another sacred grove of Kozhikode District. This sacred grove is located on the South-West region of Ramanattukara municipality. This area is maintained by members of Kavumkara family and they retain this as a well managed area for years. This sacred grove covers an area of about 0.2023 ha and is featured by its increased diversity of trees, shrubs as well as herbs. This area forms one of the most tree covered area of Ramanattukara. The maintainers of this sacred grove conduct Sakthiyam in every year as devotion to the ‘Nagaraja’ because it is believed as a region devoted to the inhabitation of Nagas. Hence, this sacred grove belongs to the category of ‘Nagakavu’ (Figure-2B).

![A) Map of India Showing Kerala State.](image1)

![B) Map of Kozhikode district.](image2)

**Figure-1:** Map of Kerala state & Kozhikode district.
Documentation: The present study was based on an extensive survey and field observations during the year December 2016-February 2017. In this study attempts were made to document and analyze religious important plants among the vegetation cover of selected sacred groves of Kozhikode district, Kerala. The documentation was mainly based on the field observation, discussions with local peoples as well as scrutinizing the literature review. During the field visits, the plant specimens were collected at different reproductive stages to prepare herbarium specimens. The collected specimens were identified taxonomically with the help of available floras and literature\textsuperscript{13-15}. The nomenclature of each species has been brought up to date as per the rules given in the International Code of Nomenclature (ICN). The specimens were processed for the preparation of Herbarium by standard methods\textsuperscript{16}. The voucher specimens were deposited in the Herbaria of PG & Research Department of Botany, St. Joseph’s College, Calicut (DEV) for future reference.

Results and discussion

The present paper highlights the religious importance of sacred plants, which are documented from two different sacred groves such as Kanangad kavu and Kavumkara of Kozhikode district, Kerala. During the study, there are about 20 species of plants belonging to 20 genera and 14 families were documented. Among these Fabaceae and Asteraceae were the most dominant families with 3 species each, followed by the families such as Rutaceae and Lamiaceae with 2 species each and all others possess single species each. In order to infer the total life forms of documented plants reveals that, trees (7 in no.), shrubs (3 in no.), herbs (7 in no.) and climbers (3 in no.). The religious potentialities of these plants and their role in worshipping god/goddess were also tabulated (Table-1).

Similar studies were conducted by Haritha \textit{et al}.\textsuperscript{17}. According to them, the religious importance of sacred plants which were documented from four different sacred groves such as Kurinjikavu, Panachikadu Saraswathi Temple, Illapozhuthukavu and Thoovakkalmala Sasthakavu of Kottayam District, Kerala consisting of 56 plant species belonging to 50 genera and 29 families.

Among these 29 families represented Apocynaceae and Moraceae are the dominant families with 5 species each followed by Caesalpiniaaceae with 4 species. While the families like Fabaceae, Rubiaceae, Oleaceae, Arecaeeae and Poaceae with 3 species each. All other families represented with single species each. In order to infer the dominant genera reveals that, among the total 50 genera represented, \textit{Ficus} is the first dominant genus with 4 species followed by \textit{Jasminum} with 3 species and \textit{Terminalia} with 2 species. Similarly, the different life forms, which are present in the sacred groves are Trees (26 Nos.), Shrubs (12 Nos.), Climbers (6 Nos.) and Herbs (12 Nos.).

Similarly Jayapal \textit{et al}.\textsuperscript{18} also studied on ‘Muniandavar’ sacred groves from Vaduvakudi at Thiruvaikulam Taluk, Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. In the present study, they recorded about 180 plant species belonging to 158 genera and 75 plant families; the key stone species which are available in the Sacred groves includes \textit{Anacardium occidentale}, \textit{Borassus flabellifer}, \textit{Ficus benghalensis} that harbors a number of birds and other survival of many other species. They also highlighted the religious importance of some selected sacred plants which are documented from the study area. Moreover, the presence of various dry evergreen plant species such as \textit{Albizia amara}, \textit{Atalantia monophylla}, \textit{Lepizanthes tetraphylla}, \textit{Madhuca longifolia}, \textit{Memecylon umbellatum}, \textit{Morinda pubescens}, \textit{Pterospermum canescens} etc. were also recorded.
**Figure-3:** Sacred plants in study area

A). Abrus precatorius L.  
B). Adenanthera pavonina L.  
C). Aegle marmelos (L.) Correa  
D). Biophytum reinwardtii (Zucc.) Klotzsch.  
E). Cardiospermum halicacabum L.  
F). Clitoria ternatea L.

**Figure-4:** Sacred plants in study area

A). Eclipta prostrata (L.) L.  
B). Evolvulus alsinoides (L.) L  
C). Glycosmis pentaphylla (Retz.) DC.  
D). Leucas zeylanica (L.) R. Br.  
E). Mesua ferrea L.  
F). Saraca asoca (Roxb.) de Wilde
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Botanical Name</th>
<th>Common Name</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Religious Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Abrus precatorius</em> L. (Figure-3A).</td>
<td>Kunnikkuru</td>
<td>Fabaceae</td>
<td>Seeds are used as offerings to Lord Krishna.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Adenanthera pavonina</em> L. (Fig. 3B).</td>
<td>Manjadi</td>
<td>Fabaceae</td>
<td>It is believed as beloved of God Vishnu. The seed as placed in a pan in temples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Aegle marmelos</em> (L.) Correa (Fig.3C).</td>
<td>Koovalam</td>
<td>Rutaceae</td>
<td>The leaves of the plant is used in temples as a part of devotion to God Shiva.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Aerva lanata</em> (L.) Juss. ex Schult.</td>
<td>Cherula</td>
<td>Amaranthaceae</td>
<td>One among the ‘Dasapushpam’ the ten sacred flowers of Kerala. The entire plants are placed in temples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Biophytum reinwardtii</em> (Zucc.) Klotzsch. (Fig.3D).</td>
<td>Mukkitti</td>
<td>Oxalidaceae</td>
<td>It is one among the ‘Dasapushpam’, the ten sacred flowers of Kerala. The entire plants or its flowers are placed in temples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>Cardiospermum halicacabum</em> L. (Fig.3E).</td>
<td>Uzhinja</td>
<td>Sapindaceae</td>
<td>It used during the Thiruvathira at Dhanu month in Malayalam calender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>Caryota urens</em> L.</td>
<td>Anapana</td>
<td>Areceace</td>
<td>Toddy obtained from the plant is used in some rituals in groves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Clerodendrum paniculatum</em> L.</td>
<td>Krishnakireedam</td>
<td>Verbanaceae</td>
<td>The attractive flowers of the plant are used for the worship of god as a part of hindu rituals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><em>Clitoria ternatea</em> L. (Fig.3F).</td>
<td>Sangupushpam</td>
<td>Fabaceae</td>
<td>It is considered as sacred plant and planted by people in their houses for pooja purposes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><em>Cynodon dactylon</em> (L.) Pers.</td>
<td>Karuka</td>
<td>Poaceae</td>
<td>One among the Dasapushpam, the ten sacred flowers of Kerala. It is used on the occasion of holy functions, festivals and marriages etc. Plant is also used at the time of child birth to convey the message to the parent of married woman. It also associated with Lord Ganesh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><em>Eclipta prostrata</em> (L.) L.</td>
<td>Kanjunni or Kayyonni</td>
<td>Asteraceae</td>
<td>One among the ‘Dasapushpam’ the ten sacred flowers of Kerala. It is used during the Thiruvathira at Dhanu month in Malayalam calender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><em>Evolvulus alsinoides</em> (L.) L.</td>
<td>Krishnakranti</td>
<td>Asteraceae</td>
<td>It is used during the Thiruvathira at Dhanu month in Malayalam calender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><em>Glycosmis pentaphylla</em> (Retz.) DC. (Fig.4C).</td>
<td>Panal</td>
<td>Rutaceae</td>
<td>Leaves are used to keep for eliminating various evil believes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><em>Ixora coccinea</em> L.</td>
<td>Techi</td>
<td>Rubiaceae</td>
<td>Flowers of the plant are used in temples for worship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><em>Leucas zeylanica</em> (L.) R. Br. (Fig.4D).</td>
<td>Thumba</td>
<td>Lamiaceae</td>
<td>Flower is regarded as the most favourite flower of Mahabali, the most prompted king of Puranas. Thus, it is used to fill Onapoo flower is regarded as the most favourite flower of Mahabali, the most prompted king of Puranas. Thus, it is used to fill Onapookkalam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td><em>Mesua ferrea</em> L. (Fig.4E).</td>
<td>Nagamaram</td>
<td>Clusiaceae</td>
<td>Seed oil is used for lighting the temple.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The plant is a part of hindu rituals and supposed to be beloved of Lord Krishna. It is worshiped and cultivated in the Hindu homes. People believed that if Tulsi is kept on the head of dying man he gets heaven. Brahmmins consider the plant as a wife of Vishnu. But in Kerala, the Nairs thought to believe this plant associated with god Shiva.

References


