

THE 'SARPA KAVU' OR 'SACRED GROVES' OF KERALA: AN OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE OF NATURE

DEVIKA G

RESEARCH SCHOLAR

DEPARTMENT OF STUDIES IN ENGLISH
KANNUR UNIVERSITY, KANNUR, INDIA

Abstract: Sacred Groves, the ecologically fragile wooded thick patches of land are found all over Kerala. It is the religious sentiments associated with Sarpa KavU which is keeping it untouched though many of the land with thick forests are cut down for commercial purposes. Rather than religious sentiments the Sarpa KavU plays a major role in preserving nature's biological wealth and keeping ecological balance. Sarpa KavU acts as an objective correlative to sensitive Nature since they are abode to rich biological wealth. This paper attempts to analyse how Sarpa KavU acts as an objective correlative to nature and also sketches the religious sentiments attached to it.

Key Words: Sarpa KavU or Sacred Groves, Objective Correlative

Environmental protection and policing is the need of the day. Climate change till now, forces to us to be n friendly with nature. For this purpose, conservation of all natural resources are a main agenda since they are the one which maintains ecological balance. Among those sources of nature, 'Sarpa KavU' or 'Sacred Groves', which are found especially in Kerala plays a major role in keeping environment or ecology in balance. Sacred Groves has got a unique place in the framework of Hindu religion. They are marked as restricted area since it helps in maintaining ecological balance of the area. There are thousands of sacred groves spread across Asia and protected by people who living there. As far as India is concerned they represent the most important ecological heritage of ancient Hindu culture and offer a valid reason for its conservation.

Sarpa KavU, meaning 'abode of snakes', is a traditional natural sacred space seen near traditional homes in Kerala state of South India. The concept of 'KavU' is an area dedicated to the god and goddesses of 'Sarpa' or 'Naga' or 'snake'. Thick foliage covered with interwoven creepers, thick climbers ascending the huge trees and self-reliant eco-system differentiated this from the rest of the enclosures. These are traditionally, since ages, is an integral part of traditional dwellings. Hinduism places an esteemed position for snakes and so it was a customary to keep away some areas for them near their home and preserves it. It is forbidden to kill the snakes or to destroy the flora of the groves. Inside the grove, a snake shrine would be built for the serpent god who, it was believed, would bring prosperity to the family. Apart from the occasional prayers and ritualistic feeding of milk to the snakes to please the serpent gods, human interventions in these ecosystems were not allowed. During the ceremony of occasional prayers shrines of serpents were bathed in turmeric and flowers were used to decorate it. They are also clothed with yellow or red cloth symbolically during the occasion of prayers or rituals. It is believed that worshipping of serpent god can offer the blessings of childbirth for the childless couple. They are also believed to cure skin diseases. The Hindu tradition believed that 'KavU Theendal', meaning 'entering the forbidden area of Sarpa KavU', will lead to death due to serpent bite or curse. The belief in Kerala is that the

serpent Gods are displeased by even slight lapses in the performance of rituals and 'poojas' to propitiate them and by activities such as neglect, trespass, and pollution. Once annoyed they cause serious problems to the people, both physical and mental. The fear thus installed on the minds of people makes them aware of the need to respect every species.

The sacred groves remain as a secure land for many endangered species of plants and animals. Medicinal plants which are so rare are still preserved in these sacred places. Sacred groves resemble a mini- evergreen forest in its physiognomy. The gigantic trees and thickly grown shrubs adds to its beauty. The vegetation of these groves is exuberant and wide variety of trees along with several herbs, shrubs are also found. The soil is richly fertile and so are ferns. A well-preserved and protected pond is a variety found over here. It helps in recharging and conserving water. Rituals will be conducted every year with the cleaning of these ponds. Quality of this pond also influence water bodies of nearby. Algae and fungus growing in these ponds are also useful for the surroundings. These clusters of thickly grown trees are hissing and rustling in the presence of floras and faunas habituating there. Some of the creepers which are as thick as a trunk of a tree are beautifully interwoven among these cluster of trees. The thickly grown Jasmine, Elanji (or biologically *Mimusops elengi*), Chemabakam (or *Plumeria*), Pāla (*Alstonia scholaris*) etc fills the air with fragrance and altogether gives a serene atmosphere. Though the aroma seduces us, nobody will touch or pluck the flowers due to the fear of sin from serpent gods. Seasonal and native fruits also add to its beauty.

Sacred Groves has become an ultimate refuge for many species of animals due to lack of vegetation outside the premises of these Kavus. There are species which have permanent habitat in the grove as well as those who visits it. Along with snakes of different categories frogs, ants, lizards, earthworms, squirrels are the most important species of these mini-woods. Birds like crows, eagles, small chirping birds, cuckoos, parrots also find home in these eco-friendly groves. Insects too make the land and soil fertile. Monkeys and rats too maintain a friendly relation with it. In some the sacred groves even *Presbytis johni* (Nilgiri langur), *Manis pentadactyla* (Pangolin) too are found.

Objective correlative, literary theory first set forth by T.S. Eliot in the essay "Hamlet and His Problems" and published in *The Sacred Wood* (1920). According to the theory,

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

The term was originally used in the 19th century by the painter Washington Allston in his lectures on art to suggest the relation between the mind and the external world. Here it is the Sarpa Kavus or Sacred Grove which acts as an objective correlative which establishes its relationship with nature or ecology which helps in maintaining ecological balance. Sacred Groves is a vigorous aid in understanding and knowing the functioning of the ecosystem. This bio-diversity connected religious phenomena is a medium through which ecosystem functions by maintaining its balance.

Sarpa Kavus is a symbol of man's peaceful and friendly co-existence with nature. Many of these sacred groves are ecological units, which have been performing a wide range of ecological functions over time, and hence they are invaluable. Sacred groves are the storehouses of many genetic diversity and some rarest species are conserved in sacred groves. In some cases, only a very few trees constitute a sacred grove, but their contribution to the well-being of the human race or ecology cannot be rejected. The floras that covers the soil absorbs water during the monsoon and release it at the time of drought. These groves act as the ultimate home for many birds and animals during summer. Medicinal plants, and herbs, trees, plants creepers with strong roots etc grow in abundant in these areas and they are significant and plays a major role in preventing soil erosion. When greenery is vanishing day by day, Sarpa Kavus remains intact and stands as a symbol of a small forest. They

are the ultimate treasures of many species. These Groves are not merely groves but a small 'ecosystem' where many species find its refuge. It also helps in storing water vapour contents and thus humidity will be controlled so that there will be proper rainfall. As a symbol of conservation of elements of fresh air, water, soil, soil, fauna and flora, giving religious belief behind the creation and protection of sacred groves could not explain fully the purpose behind such an effort. Our forefathers' tremendous ecological awareness need to be appreciated.

Rejecting these ecological function, some of the sacred groves are being destroyed regarding it as a superstition. Sacred Groves are the relicts of the socio-cultural epoch of a civilization. Since conservation these natural resources included religious boon or restriction no one dared to touch even a small part of it. The rapid modernisation acts as a destroyer for these groves. Now steps are being taken for the preservation of this environmentally sensitive area. An organisation called Kerala Sarpakavu Samrakshana Samiti was formed with aim of conserving these groves. Government aid were also declared for the owner of the grove for the purpose of preserving and protecting it. Since Scared Groves acts as an objective correlative through which nature expresses itself as a protector to many species as well as humans, they must be protected so as to maintain ecological balance and provide benefit for the nature. Hands must be joined to protect and preserve its wide vegetation.

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