



Research Note

doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20546/ijcrbp.2016.309.012>

## Traditional Environmental Conservation in Tamil Nadu, India

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### Abstract

In order to prevent people from desecrating the vegetation resource, the ancient people sanctified natural elements as sacred trees, sacred animals, and sacred habitats etc. Although some sacred groves have been preserved well by local beliefs not to disturb the trees, the others have faced destruction or the erosion of the groves. To protect the cultural and environmental values of the sacred groves four groves situated on the east coast of Tamil Nadu have been studied. The specific issues we researched are local community and sacred groves and environmental impacts on sacred groves. This research identifies the existing folk knowledge and conservation system and seeks the appropriate governmental acts and rules to preserve the sacred groves.

### Article Info

Accepted: 30 August 2016

Available Online: 06 September 2016

### Keywords

Cultural values  
Government acts  
Natural elements  
Sacred groves

### Introduction

Sacred Groves were established in ancient days by ecosystem people inhabiting the hilly terrain when they attempted agriculture/cultivation as a vocation. As clearing of forests became inevitable, such people adopted ecologically prudent ways to preserve the environment. In order to prevent people from desecrating the vegetation resource, the ancient people sanctified natural elements such as sacred trees, sacred animals, sacred habitats, etc. (Krishna, 2005).

Much of its environmental traditions and cultural values (including folklore and religion) have been preserved in the sacred groves (Krishnamurthy, 1998). Environmental conservation is the function of the cultural preservation on the sacred groves such as local deities, myths and beliefs on trees, festivals, rituals, worshipping to god through offerings. In Tamil Nadu, *pooja* is performed. Sacred groves are a group of trees or a patch of vegetation protected by the local people through religious and cultural practices evolved to minimize destruction (Oliver King et al., 1997).

Unflinching faith in supernaturalism and the fear of God are two vital elements that contributed to the survival of the sacred groves (Ramanujam and Kadamban, 1999). With the worshipping of the local deity and taboos on the cutting trees, many villages are still preserving them as a place for the number of native species of animals, plants, insects and microorganisms. Sacred groves also have the important role of recharging the aquifers and improving the soil stability by preventing soil erosion (Amirthalingam, 2005).

Although some sacred groves have been preserved well by local beliefs not to disturb the trees, the others have faced destruction or the erosion of the groves. Some examples of the erosion factors are listed here; commercial forestry, development projects, shifting in belief system, sanskritisation, pilgrimage and tourism, removal of biomass, encroachment, modernization and market forces, and fragmentation and perforation (RCNAEB, 1995). To protect the cultural and environmental values of the sacred groves from these erosion factors, this paper identifies the existing folk knowledge and conservation system and seeks the

appropriate governmental actions to preserve the sacred groves.

My hypothesis which has been tested through our fieldwork and discussed in this paper is that the government needs to take a regional specific policy to preserve the sacred groves, depending upon the situation and problems faced by the groves. When looking the policies and the Acts related to sacred groves, there are very few guidelines which consider the region-specific issues. However, in reality, some sacred groves have been preserved well with local belief but the others do not have a strong belief and the erosion of sacred groves have caused serious cultural and environmental consequences; thus, in the latter case, direct governmental policy and its implementation is necessary to preserve the sacred groves.

### Research area and the four sites of the research

The four sites are Chendiran Killai and Kuzhanthaikuppam, Keezhbuvanagiri, and Puthupet. According to the five landscapes of Tamil Nadu, Kuzhanthaikuppam is recognized as *Marudham* and Chendiran Killai, Keezhbuvanagiri and Puthupet are recognized as *Neidhal*. The folklore dimension shows the cultural significance of the sacred groves, describing the situation of the four research areas near Puducherry and Cuddalore. The specific issues we researched are local community and sacred groves and environmental impacts on sacred groves.

### Local community and sacred groves

There are significant relations between the local community and sacred groves for a long time. This paper shows the landscape of the groves, the origin of the village name, the deity and sub-deity, *pooja* and festivals.

## 1. Chendiran Killai

### Landscape and physical structure

The village of Chendiran Killai is located in Chidambaram taluk, the Cuddalore revenue district of Tamil Nadu. Chendiran Killai is located 5 km towards the western side of Mutlur. The auto-rickshaw dropped us in front of the resting space for village people, just near the road to the sacred groves. The villager who guided us told us that this stream surrounds the sacred grove and this stream shows the entrance to the grove. Inside the grove there were some roads connected to the

place of each deity. Chendiran Killai has 15 acres of sacred groves and 20 acres of agriculture lands.

### Origin of the village name

The priest told us the origin of the village name. "Chendiran" was one village and "killai" was another village; then the two villages were joint together and hence the name Chendiran Killai.

### Deities and beliefs

In Chendiran Killai, the main deity is Muniyappan, who came from Virudhachalam for hunting purposes and stayed one night in the sacred groves. After the *pooja*, within 15 days to 1 month, the village people have a belief that Agni Veeran can solve this problem by returning the missing things or punishing the thief. In this site, the other gods are also associated; the god names are Aiyandar, Ponniammaan (Sister of Muniyaappan), and Muttal Ravuttan.

### Festival

Conducted nearly around the same time as the *Taiipoosam* festival, a big festival for Tamil Nadu, Chendiran Killai holds the *Deepa* festival as its biggest festival. The villagers celebrate the festival with 1,00,000 oil lamps around and inside the sacred groves. In Chendiran Killai, the village people believe that *Agni Veeran*, one of the sub-deity, metes out punishment to people who touch or cut the trees. One of the punishments is firing the houses of landless agricultural laborers if they touch the trees. According to the priests, if people construct a house by using the trees in the sacred grove, the god gives the punishment by firing the house. If outsiders touch the trees, the village communities' fine them; and the village people believe, Agni Veeran will come in their dream. Only the temple committee can cut "pirambu" trees, which are partly grown in the agricultural lands near these sacred groves, to collect money for temple management and *pooja*. In contrast, if other people cut "pirambu" trees, they receive punishment from god. For example, the *Zamindar*, a landowner of the agricultural land, cut "pirambu" trees, which are grown in the land, and sold the trees to get money. After selling the trees, the *Zamindar* suffered from non-stop diarrhea and hence the village people believe that he got punishment from the god.

However, the panchayat, the local governing body, is allowed to collect dead trees and sell or tender them to

other villagers to obtain income to maintain the sacred groves or use them for cooking purposes. According to the priest, the village headman collects the old leaves and uses it for *pooja* and temple management. The trees available in the sacred groves, which a villager told us in Chendiran Killai, are Punga tree, Neem tree, Aal tree, Vennaheeri tree, Palmyrah tree, Kallie Narathai, Thoornngmooji tree, and many flowers and herbals.

In Chendiran Killai, the sacred grove is recognized as a family grove, where one family from a particular community owns the grove, while other villagers also have the responsibility of conserving the groves and hence do not touch the trees. Traditionally, *Naidu* owned the whole sacred groves for more than 400 years; but nowadays, *Vannaiyar*, a dominant community, has increased their education level and have purchased the lands of sacred groves from *Naidu*. The grove's current owner is Dakshinamurthi Padayachi (72 years old). Everybody in the villages can access the sacred groves. Previously, the government tried to obtain the land of the sacred groves, but village people are against the possession of the groves by the government.

## 2. Keezhbuvanagiri

### Landscape and physical structure

Keezhbuvanagiri is a small village of 1,620 households with a population of 10,760. The village falls within the Chidambaram taluk in the Cuddalore revenue district of Tamil Nadu. The village is located at a distance of 1 kilometer from the sacred grove; because of the distance from the village, the village people seem to take little interest in the maintenance of the grove. Previously, the sacred grove covered 10 acres, but now it is only 1.1 ha (2.7 acres). However, the current area of the grove is 4.5 acres. From the bus stop of the village, it is almost 20 minutes walkable distance to reach the sacred grove via Cuddalore-Chidambaram State Highway. Nearby the Highway, there is a water stream which indicates the entrance to the sacred grove; however, the water was contaminated and polluted. There are a few trees left in the grove; half of the grove has become a public space and the other half shows some trees and deity's statue and stones.

### Origin of the village name

The origin of the name Keezhbuvanagiri came from the king's name and hill name. "*Bhuvanendran*" king, previously, ruled this place and village.

### Deities and beliefs

The sacred grove in Keezhbuvanagiri is recognized as a memorial grove which is the groves surrounding a graveyard of a folk hero. There is Udayarappan's temple inside the sacred grove. Ariyalur is a small town and till now people in this town come here to pray to Udayarappan. The villagers told us that Udayarappan came to this sacred grove for hunting purposes and stayed in the sacred grove permanently. The Udaiyars and Vanniyars lived in the same village and Udayarappan was from the Udaiyar community, who were the landlords who owed allegiance to the Zamindari system, the land owner system in an earlier era. Because a vegetarian is considered to be a person of higher caste in the hindu system this story implies the caste difference between the Udaiyars and Vanniyars. The question is why Udayarappan, a vegetarian, came to the grove for hunting purposes. While the main deity of this sacred grove is Udayappan, the bodyguard deity is Aiyannar (Veeran) and the sub-deities are Pavadairayan, Muttal Ravuttan, Petchi, Moochi, and Saptha Kanniga. This sacred grove has a history of more than 200 years according to the villagers.

### Festival and *pooja*

Every Friday at 12 O'clock, people in the village conduct *pooja* by offering coconut, banana, tender coconut, rose water, curd, turmeric, sandal powder, and also sacrifice a goat. The villagers, who are weavers by profession, bring the decorated bronze image of Udayarappan from the village temple on a bullock cart accompanied by local musical instruments. Many of the sacred groves are fragmented and perforated by roadways, extension of power lines, or reclaimed land for agriculture. As a matter of fact, a village man told us, is that with the income from releasing the land of the sacred groves to the brick industry, three temples, including *Draupadi* community temple are maintained. In Keezhbuvanagiri, until 30 years ago, a priest maintained the sacred grove. However, after the death of the priest, the *Vannaiyar* community (dominant community) has had the ownership of the grove and maintained the sacred groves.

Currently, the *Vanniyar* community has 125 family groups in Keezhbuvanagiri. The *Vanniyar* community selects the temple committee every four years. The *Vanniyar* community leased the parts of the sacred groves to the brick industry for obtaining money for temple management. Other communities can access

(pray or worship) in the sacred groves, but they have no responsibility to protect the sacred groves. Therefore, one community maintained the sacred groves and decided by itself to release the land to the other. With the fact that nobody can prevent this releasing, the sacred grove tends to be easily destructed. A villager told that fifty years ago, the government tried to obtain the sacred groves. However, the local community was against it, because the community believed that governmental action would degrade the environment of the sacred groves; as a result, the community won in the court.

### 3. Kuzhanthaikuppam

#### Landscape and physical structure

This site houses an age-old temple enshrined by Aiyanar, and the site spreads over a 1.8 ha area. The other data shows that the area of the sacred groves is 1.5 ha. According to the villagers, the sacred grove is 15 acre (6.1 ha) and nearby hills are 30 acres (12.1 ha); thus, the total area is 45 acres (18.2 ha), which are owned by temple. The location of the sacred groves is very far from any cities or main roads; therefore, outsiders find it hard to access the sacred groves.

#### Deities and beliefs

The main deity is Aiyanar and the subdeity is Veeran. The village is his domain, and by protecting the crops, he protects the very life of the village. The priest (in Tamil, *Pujari*) gives a list of food to devotees, who then buy the food. Daily, the priest prepares *pongal* to offer to the Muniyappan without salt, because the god will punish him if the priest adds salt into the *pongal*. The temple has been in existence since the eighth century (Srinivasan, 1993). In Kuzhanthaikuppam, an old man told his experience: when he bought the trees for fire and broke the trees, where the trees were taken from the sacred groves, he was shocked to see that plenty of scorpions came from the trunk of the trees. In this way, the old man believes that people should not cut the trees in sacred groves.

In Kuzhanthaikuppam, the dominant community of the three villages owns the sacred groves. The names of these three villages are Vilangal Pattu, Kuzhandai Kuppam and Pethan Kuppam. The sacred grove of this area is recognized as *Family Groves*. *Vanniar* community, which is the dominant community of the three villages, has the ownership of the sacred groves. However, the other communities also access the sacred groves.

### 4. Puthupet

In the entrance of the sacred grove, there are terracotta statues and a small park. Some parts of the grove were fragmented and came to be agricultural lands. There were no stream around the groves, but, according to a villager, when it is raining, a road around the grove becomes a stream. The sacred grove in Puthupet is recognized as village groves, where the Padaiyatchi community owns the sacred grove.

#### Deities

In Puthupet, the main deity has been Aiyanar with a small temple, but later, Manjaneeswarar, a classical god, also became the main deity and a new bigger temple was constructed for Manjaneeswarar where many outsiders have come and visited the temple to pray to Manjaneeswarar. The sub-deity is Nagathamam, a female deity.

#### Environmental impacts on sacred groves

The sacred groves in Chendiran Killai and Kuzhanthaikuppam have been conserved well by the strong local belief not to cut the trees. In contrast, the local belief seems not strong in Keezhibuvanagiri and Puthupet; so that, the sacred groves of these areas have been disturbed by human activities. Here, the research shows what local belief prevents people cutting the trees in Chendiran Killai and Kuzhanthaikuppam; then, what are the erosion factors of the sacred groves, where Keezhibuvanagiri and Puthupet have faced erosion over the years.

This has resulted in the erection of a temple in the sacred groves. In Puthupet, traditionally, the main deity has been Aiyanar, the folk god. However, in a later period, the village people erected a temple for Manjaneeswarar, a classical god. This erection has disturbed the sacred groves by using the lands to build the temple. In addition, to pray to the Hindu god, many outsiders come to the groves while outsiders may be not so interested in Aiyanar, the folk god.

In Puthupet, the sacred groves are located very near the East Coast Road (ECR); therefore, outsiders can easily access the groves, which give outsiders the incentive of pilgrimage and tourism. Either the reason is to pray to Manjaneeswarar or just come for picnic purpose; many outsiders come to the sacred groves; then, they throwaway their wastes in the groves.

In the earlier era, seven villages owned the land of the sacred grove. However, currently, just one man own the lands and receives the income through the temple, while other village people cannot receive such income and insist that the benefit should be shared equally among 7 villages. In Puthupet, 50 years ago, temple trusts released the lands to some people. The people paid the government taxes, but the people tender (release) the land to the other people who now use the land for the purpose of agriculture. The Hindu Religious Endowment Trust, governed by the Tamil Nadu government is associated with the temple. There are inner conflicts on the ownership of the grove.

### Encroachment

Many instances are reported where the groves have been encroached upon by the local communities and/or by various government line departments as well as by people migrating from outside. The temple authorities released the sacred groves to the other party, but the trouble was that the other party sold the lands to another party without the permission of the temple authorities. The modern education system fails to instill respect for local traditions. As a result, the institution of sacred groves is losing its cultural importance for the younger generation of local people. The lure of short-term commercial gains has prompted the destruction of the traditional resource base, including the sacred groves.

### Governance of sacred groves

There are mainly three types of sacred groves based on the governance system: government groves, family groves, memorial groves, and common property land. Governmental groves are the groves under the control of state forest departments, under the control of revenue and other government departments. Common property lands are the sacred groves owned by the whole village or more than one village. Family groves are under the ownership of private group such as a family, a group of families, a clan or trust body. Memorial groves are the groves surrounding a graveyard of village elders or heroes (Krishnan, 2004).

### Overview of current policies and acts related to sacred groves

Currently, there is no separate law on sacred groves in India. In 1998, C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre prepared the National Policy on the Conservation of Sacred Groves (Draft) and submitted it to the Ministry of

Environment and Forests, Government of India (<http://www.wii.gov.in/envis/sdnp/policy.htm>). The other relevant policies and acts to the sacred groves are listed here.

### The Draft National Biodiversity and Action Plan (NBSAP)

Including some parts of the National Policy on the Conservation of Sacred Groves (Draft), the Draft National Biodiversity and Action Plan (NBSAP) was formulated from 2000 to 2003 (Kalpavriksh: [www.kalpavriksh.org](http://www.kalpavriksh.org)). "Biological Diversity Act 2002 and the Biodiversity Rule 2004 aimed at implementing the Convention of Biological Diversity (BOD). The draft rules for the Biological Diversity Act 2002 specify that the NBA take steps to build a database and to create information and documentation systems for biological resources and associated traditional knowledge through bio-diversity registers and electronic databases (including databases for sacred groves)".

"To check the loss of biodiversity owing to environmental degradation, in the National Environmental Policy (NEP) 2004(Draft), the policy proposes to strengthen the protection of natural heritage sites including "biodiversity hotspots", ancient sacred groves and other landscapes ([www.wii.gov.in/envis/sdnp/policy.htm](http://www.wii.gov.in/envis/sdnp/policy.htm)). The meaningful finding is that briefly we can divide the sacred groves into two dimensions: one is where the local belief is still strong enough to conserve the sacred groves and the other is where the local belief is weak to preserve the sacred groves (The Hindu, 2004).

### Chendiran Killai and Kuzhanthaikuppam

Chendiran Killai and Kuzhanthaikuppam are classified into the first dimension, which have evident strong belief to preserve the sacred groves. To check that the third party (Research institution and NGO) could check the conditions of the sacred groves, because the local people sometimes have antipathy to the government entering the land. The local people are afraid that government is trying to take their lands; so, they believe that by the possession of the government the sacred groves and rituals will not be preserved in the future.

### Keezhbuvanagiri and Puthupet

The local belief is weak in Keezhbuvanagiri and Puthupet and the results in the destruction of sacred

groves. The recommended actions taken by government are fencing around the sacred groves. When making new road construction, governments should try to avoid the area of sacred groves in the future. Governments should also prevent the activities of selling or using the sacred groves for economic or agricultural purposes. In Puthupet, the governmental actions have been taken over the decades, but no strict regulations have been implemented to conserve the sacred groves; therefore, we can see environmental destruction as a form of the land shift to the agricultural lands and the number of wastes thrown in the groves. Through education, it is effective to teach children the traditional knowledge to conserve the sacred groves. The restriction to tender or sell the sacred groves is necessary and the violators should receive the appropriate punishment.

### Conclusion

Since the sacred groves preserve their cultural and environmental values, it is necessary to preserve them for the future generations. Based on the fieldwork findings, the regional specific policy is essential on the sacred groves, depending upon the situation. Because of the rapid environmental degradation in the sacred groves, the research to document the traditional knowledge to conserve the sacred groves is urgent and it is necessary to conduct more fieldwork over Tamil Nadu and other parts of India.

### Conflict of interest statement

Author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

### Acknowledgement

I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Nanditha Krishna, Honorary Director of C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre for her constant encouragement and valuable guidance.

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#### How to cite this article:

Sudhakar, P., 2016. Traditional environmental conservation in Tamil Nadu, India. Int. J. Curr. Res. Biosci. Plant Biol. 3(9), 83-88. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20546/ijcrbp.2016.309.012>