

# Myths and beliefs on sacred groves among Kembatti communities: A case study from Kodagu District, South-India

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**Abstract:** Sacred groves are forest patches of pristine vegetation left untouched by the local inhabitants for centuries in the name of deities, related socio-cultural beliefs and taboos. Though the different scientists defined it from various points of view, the central idea or the theme of sacred grove remains the same. Conservation of natural resources through cultural and religious beliefs has been the practice of diverse communities in India, resulting in the occurrence of sacred groves all over the country. Though they are found in all bio-geographical realms of the country, maximum number of sacred groves is reported from Western Ghats, North East India and Central India. In Karnataka, sacred groves are known by many local names such as: Devarakadu, Kaan forest, Siddaravana, Nagabana, Bana etc. This paper gives detailed insight on sacred groves of kodagu District of Karnataka. Indigenous communities like Kembatti Holeyas and Kudiyas defined them as ‘tracts of virgin forest that were left untouched, harbour rich biodiversity, and are protected by the local people due to their cultural and religious beliefs and taboos that the deities reside in them and protect the villagers from different calamities’.

**Key Words:** Conservation; Ecosystem services; Sacred groves; Sustainability; Traditional, Western Ghats, Kodagu District, Indigenous communities, socio-cultural beliefs, taboos, biodiversity, Kembatti Holeyas, Kudiyas

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

India’s forests are not only inhabited by wilderness but also by indigenous forest dwellers for centuries. In India, as elsewhere in many parts of the world, a number of communities practice different forms of nature worship. One such significant tradition is that of providing protection to patches of forests dedicated to deities and/or ancestral spirits. These patches of forests are known as sacred groves. Indigenous communities are dwelling in forest areas in many developing countries, and they have been managing and conserving resource for generations. “Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system” They possess traditional environmental knowledge and experience, which are highly invaluable in managing and conserving both forests and wildlife (Kothari et al, 1998). Local communities are dwelling in forest areas in many developing countries, and they have been managing and conserving resources for generations. They are leading subsistence livelihood by extracting various forest products sustainably for ages.

## 2. BRIEF HISTORY:

Sacred groves are forest patches of pristine vegetation left untouched by the local inhabitants for centuries in the name of deities, related socio-cultural beliefs and taboos. Gadgil and Vartak (1976) defined the sacred groves as ‘sizable patches of forests where all forms of vegetation including shrubs and climbers are under the protection of the reigning deity, and the removal, even of dead wood is taboo’. Ramanujam and Cyril (2003) defined them as ‘patches of natural vegetation dedicated to local deities and protected by religious tenets and cultural traditions; they may also be anthropogenic tree stands raised in honour of heroes and warriors and maintained by the local community with religious fervour’. The first authentic report of the sacred groves is in the Memoirs of Ward and Corner (1827), cited in the 1891 census of Travancore state which was part of erstwhile Madras Rajasthani.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Garrett (2007) conducted a study of sacred groves in southwest Sichuan and identified the strong Tibetan cultural beliefs and high environmental values protection the sacred groves. Vaitkevicius (2007) reported the sacred groves of the Balts in Lithuania and presented the linguistic background, the historical documents from the 12 th –

18th century, the key folklore motifs of the topic, as well as selected examples of groves. Sukumaran and Soloman (2008) assessed the floristic richness of the sacred groves of Agastheeshwaram, Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu, India. They recorded 98 angiosperm species from 87 genera and 43 families were enumerated from the sacred grove. Of these species 80.6% are used as medicine, 6.12% have a timber value and 10.20% are used as minor forest produce by the local inhabitants of the study area. Kassilly and Tsingalia (2009) studied the Tiriki sacred groves of Hamisi District, Kenya and reported that break-down in the socio-cultural fabric of the Tiriki community due to the influence of modern religion, education and government regulations were responsible for loss of cultural values and indigenous knowledge associated with sacred groves among local people. Konar (2010) assessed the causes, consequences and cures of the degradation of sacred groves in the hundred sample tribal communities, most of which are located on and around the Ajodhya Hills covered with forest layer, of Purulia district in West Bengal. A survey of sacred natural sites in Garhwal and Kumaon regions of Uttarkhand, was carried out (Gokhale and Pala, 2011). Kumar et al., (2011) studied the biodiversity and phytosociology of three large sacred groves in Pudukkottai district, Tamil Nadu, i.e. Suranviduthi, Nadiamman and Manganampatti sacred grove.

Socio-cultural belief system and plant diversity of Kwand and Bund sacred jungles, Pakistan were explored by Shah et al., (2012). The basic philosophy behind these sacred jungles is that these jungles are shelters for the holy prophet of Islam, and hence any harm done to the jungles will be punished and ruined. Mishra et al., (2004) investigated the effects of anthropogenic disturbance on plant diversity and community structure of a sacred grove in Meghalaya, by identifying undisturbed, moderately disturbed and highly disturbed stands based on canopy cover, light penetration and tree density. The study revealed that the mild disturbance favoured species richness, but with increased degree of disturbance as was the case in the highly disturbed stand, the species richness markedly decreased. A comparative description of tree diversity of community-protected kaan forests and state-managed reserve forests influenced by the level of disturbance and rainfall was assessed in Sagar taluk, Karnataka (Gunaga et al., 2013). Kaan forests possessed a higher species richness, with 85 tree species, than the reserve forests (57).

#### 4. THE AREA UNDER STUDY:

The Kodagu district of Karnataka State is situated on the summits of the eastern and western slopes of the Western Ghats, on the south-western border of Karnataka and Kerala States. It extends from 11°, 56' to 12°, 52' North latitude and 75°, 22' to 76°, 12' East longitude. When one hears the word 'Kodagu' what at once crosses one's mind is the majesty of its mountain ranges, its sprawling Coffee plantations, evergreen forests with valuable timber like teak, rosewood, sandalwood, and other forest wealth, Orange gardens, monsoon rains, river the Cauvery, Kodavas its inhabitants a handsome and robust set of people conspicuously different from the rest of the people around them in south India, their customs, culture and a host of many more things which are very fascinating and lovely.

In ancient inscription and writings Kodagu has been referred to as 'Kudinad' or 'Kudomalainadu.' These nomenclatures for the present day Kodagu were extensively used in the times of Gangas, Kadambas and later Cholas who ruled this country in the 5th, 10th, and 11th (A.D) centuries respectively. 'Kodu' literally means 'West' and 'Nad' means country. In some of the early writings about this land the name had undergone a little change and became 'Kodagu malenad'.

M. Muthanna is of the opinion that the present name 'Kodagu' is derived from Tamil vocabulary. The word 'Agu' which appears to be Malayalam in origin means inside. So the literal translation of the word Kodagu is 'West inside', the meaning of which in English may be interpreted as inside of the west. During the British rule this Kodagu was anglicized as 'Coorg'. The name of the land Kodagu gets its name from Vindhya, from the land on the ridges of Vindhya Mountains and Himachal Pradesh, from the hilly slope of lands at the base of Himalaya ranges.

The landmass of the Kodagu appears to have hung down from the ridges of Western Ghats. Kodagu in Kannada and Coorg in English are derived from the land called Kodagu and the people called of Kodava. The name Kodava is supposed to have been derived from 'Kodimalenad' meaning higher forestland. Puranic version says that the land of initial settlement was called 'Krodadesa' which later became Kodava. The word Kodava means the people blessed by Godmother Kaveri ('Kod' means give, bless and 'avva' means mother Kaveri) this version is supported by the puranic version. Lt. O'Connor, in his memories of the Coorg survey is of the view that Kodagu may mean "Country of millions of hills" indicating the hilly nature of the country. Kodagu is often described as the "Switzerland of India." "Scotland of India or the "Southern Kashmir" etc.

Kodagu district is the smallest district in the state with an area of 4102 Square kilometers. It is bounded by Hassan district on the North, by Mysore district on the East, by Dakshin Kakkanda district on the West and by Cannanore district of Kerala State on the South. The shape of the district on the map has been compared to that of an 'infant's knitted sock.' A narrow arm about 20 kilometers long and about 10 kilometers wide projects northwards into Hassan district on the East. It is a land - locked district.

The greatest length is from the Hemavathi river in the north to the Brahmagiri range in the south is about 96 kilometers and its greatest breadth is from Sampaje in the west to Kushalaagar in the east is about 64 kilometers. Kodagu is the smallest district in Karnataka State.

## **5. METHOD OF STUDY:**

The data, which is being utilized throughout the work of this report, has been collected from various sources. The primary information was collected through personal interview with the rural people in various villages of Kodagu district. For this purpose fieldwork was undertaken a number of times in the study area at different times. The secondary data was collected from various Government and semi-government departments such as State Statistical Office, Public Works Department, Police Department and Health Department. Other important data sources are the District Census Hand Books of various years, Karnataka at a Glance of various years, District Gazetteer, Economic and Market Intelligence Unit of Coffee Board, Periodicals, Daily Newspapers etc.

I collected some firsthand information about the kembatti from available reports and literature. Next in the field of before starting actual survey i collected some basic information from the state officials who have regular contact with these people. The panchayat development officer gave me preliminary information about them. Once i accompanied him to the settlement of kembatti. It appeared that the kembatti living in kodagu were more backward and underdeveloped.

The technique employed in collecting data were interview, observation, genologic, case histories, group discussions and interview in structural schedules. At time, whenever it is possible, i also participated in their activities.

## **6. PEOPLE:**

Generally the district is comprised of a number of caste, sub-caste, and tribal people. Tribal groups constitute a meager population and are seen only in Kodagu district. Kodavas, Gowdas and Veerashaivas are the major castes that existed in the district. Adiyas, Airis, Betta Kuruba, Jenu Kuruba, Kembatti Holey (sc), Maleya (sc), are the other sub-castes and tribal people who lived in the district. Kodavas constitute the most important portion of population in the district, and we can find out the Kodava people all over the district. But they are mainly concentrated in Virajpet taluk. Gowdas have migrated to Kodagu from Dakshina Kakkana, and they are greater in number around Bhagamandala. Namadhari Gowda and Vokkaliga Gowda are the sub groups of Gowda community. Namadhari Gowdas are mainly found in Nallur, Shirangala, Hebbale, Kudlur and Kudumangaluru Vokkaliga Gowdas are mainly inhabited in Madravalli, Kundalli, Kole, Shantalli, Gowdalli and other places of Somvarpet taluk. Veerashaivas (Lingayats) form another major caste who existed in Kodagu district. They were mainly concentrated in Kodlipet and Shanivarasanthe of Somvarpet taluk, which is border region of Mysore and Hassan districts. These people constitute a negligible number in Virajpet taluk. Adiyas are found in and around Bhagamandala in Madikeri taluk. They live in hutments near the gardens where they work. Agasas are in larger number in Srimangala, Bhagamandala, Hudikeri, Napoklu, Balamuri, Betur, Kannangala and Bittangala. Virajpet taluk claims a larger population of Betta Kuruba. The Jenu Kurubas are found in all the taluks of Kodagu district, but they are in large number in Ponnampet, Sreemangala, Ammatti (in Virajpet taluk) and also in Somvarpet region. Kembatti Holey (sc) is found only in Kodagu district. Maleya another sc community lived in Kodambur, Heravanad, Biligeri, Maragodu, Ploorgeri, Ballamavatti of Madikeri taluk and Kirundadu, Kaikadu, Konnanjageri, Srimangala, Balale and Nemmale of Virajpet taluk.

## **7. KEMBATTI COMMUNITY:**

Kembatti community is one among the eight exogamous groups of holeyas found in Kodagu district. They are considered to be the natives of Kodagu district and are found only in Kodagu district. According to K.S. Singh (2002:605) "their population figure is not separately available as they are grouped with the holeya". They basically speak Kodava language and they use Kannada language for communication but for writing the Kannada script is used. The Kodava language which is used by the people of the Kembatti community varies to a certain extent from one region to another.

There are various legends regarding the origin of the name Kembatti. According to one legend once there was a severe drought in Kodagu and the ruler of Kodagu asked a Kembatti who is basically dependent on agriculture, which paddy can be grown in the season of drought. The Kembatti suggested the King to grow a special type of paddy which was called 'Kembattu'. This paddy yielded good crop and the King gave the name of the paddy to the Kembatti people. Another reason given for the name Kembatti is because in the ritual ceremonies the Kembatties wear red coloured clothes. So they got the name of Kembatti.

Kembatties are the custodians of a culture, rooted in integrated values of a perspective that women and nature are one. The research work is carried by using participatory tools and techniques in addition to anthropological methods in collecting the information from the respondents comprising culture, religion and livelihood in Kodagu District of Karnataka state, particularly in western ghat region. According to them, forest and nature as their mother. Unlike tribes, a distinct characteristic of nativity is that they have an ethic of enough. Nothing is taken from nature, other than what is essential. The ritual folk dance is a life celebration of their oneness with nature. The Divine is perceived in the trees, mountains, streams, animals and in all creation.

## **8. SACRED GROVES OF KODAGU:**

The Kodagu Devarakadu (Sacred Groves) is some of the last remnants of primary high forest in southern Karnataka of Western Ghats. Through the forest meanders the river Kaveri, the spiritual abode of the river goddess. Set within the devarakadu are many Totem sculptures and art works erected in honour of hunting God and other Tribal deities. Terracotta figurine is unique sculpture created to reinforce the links between people, animal and the sacred grove, and the way in which scheduled tribe and caste of Kodagu linked their establishment and growth to the spirits of the forest. The Grove is an active religious site where daily, weekly and monthly worship takes place. In addition, an annual processional festival to re-establish the mystic bonds between the gods and the people of the villages occurs every year over seven days in April and May and thus sustains the living cultural traditions of the native people. Most of the sacred groves reported from Karnataka are from Kadagu district. It embraces 1,214 sacred groves covering an area of 2,550.45 ha. Of these sacred groves, 508 are present in Virajpet taluq, 284 in Madikeri and 422 in Somwarpet taluq. The district has at least one sacred grove in each village; many have more than one sacred grove. A very large proportion of sacred groves are small islands surrounded by coffee plantations and agricultural fields. The Grove is also a natural biodiversity containing over 300 species of flora and fauna, and some are endemic. The authenticity of the Grove is related to its value as a sacred place. The sacred nature of places can only be continually reinforced if that sacredness is widely respected. At the same time the new sculptures are part of a long and continuing tradition of sculptures created to reflect native's cosmology. Although their form reflects a new stylistic departure, the works were not created to glorify the artists but rather through their size and intimidating shapes to re-establish the sacredness of the Grove.

The sacred groves of Kodagu can be categorized into a few types such as-

- Paisari Devarakadu/ sacred groves: These sacred groves are owned by the Government and are jointly managed by the village community and the Forest Department. Most of the sacred groves come under this category.
- Privately managed sacred groves: Some families have donated a part of their forest lands for developing sacred groves, which are managed privately by the respective families.
- Hole Devarakadu/ sacred grove: These are the sacred groves which belong to scheduled castes.
- Kaimada or Karonakadu: In these sacred groves, family ancestors are regarded as almighty and worshipped by building small structures in their memory.
- Suggi Devarabana: Here, the grama-devatha or harvest goddess is worshipped during the harvest season.
- Mattu kadu: Devotees worship samadhi/ tomb of saints in this category of sacred groves. They are mainly maintained by Veerashaiva community and found mainly in Somwarpet taluq.

Belief and taboo system followed by Kembatti in the sacred groves of Kodagu is similar to those of any other sacred grove in the country such as;

- Restricted human activities within the grove with exception of festivals and prayer times.
- Taboos and folklores to restrain people from disturbing the forest: violations of restrictions might cause crop failure, epidemic strike or natural calamities.
- Prohibition of cattle grazing which was sometimes ensured by digging trenches along the periphery.
- Restriction to enter the groves for lower caste people and women during menstrual period. In some sacred groves, women are never allowed to enter.
- Prohibition of ploughing, sowing and erection of unauthorized structures.
- Complete ban on lopping or axing of trees: fallen twigs may be collected.
- No animal can be harmed within the grove.

## **9. CONCLUSION:**

Physically, a sacred grove is a piece of forest land, but culturally, it is associated with deities, rituals and taboos. The present study is, therefore intended to propose management and conservation as an alternative strategy towards the sustainability of forests around human settlements and also an attempt to explore the role of sacred groves in conservation and management of different ecosystem services. Traditional and indigenous communities in India are of the religious belief that medicinal groves and plants are sacred in nature. Sacred groves are patches of trees on forest land that are protected communally with religious zeal and connotations. These forest areas have been protected since ages by traditional societies and indigenous communities with their socio-cultural and religious practices. Sacred groves as a rule are treated piously. Sacred trees are prohibited from cutting and not axed except when wood is needed for the religious purposes like construction and repair of temple buildings or in cases like worshipping, death



ceremonies and temple rituals. Thus, sacred groves carry direct and everlasting pious status and assist in maintaining social fabric of the society. From the present study it is concluded that, religious identification of medicinal plants and practices have influenced the folklore towards a sense of selfless services in the name the Gods. However, during the course of modernization, mechanization and globalization in the recent past has transformed and weakened both cultural and biological integrity. Changes in social belief, modernization and erosion of cultural practices are some of the major factors contributing towards degradation of the ancient institutional heritage which need to be looked into. Hence, I think its perception constitutes an interesting topic to look through, even if situation has been changing in the last decades and further research on this topic would constitute a positive path to public policies elaboration in the area.

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