

## An Analysis of SACRED GROVES with Special Reference to Coorg

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### ABSTRACT

This document gives an Analysis of Sacred Grooves (Devara Kaadu) in Coorg (Kodagu), a district in Karnataka state, India. In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss various aspects of Sacred Grooves in Coorg as presented. An analysis of Social and Environmental concern of people in Coorg has been done with an emphasis on the unique concept of Devara Kaadu in Kodagu.

**Keywords:** Coorg, Kodagu, Sacred Grooves, Devarara Kaadu.

### INTRODUCTION

In every society on this planet there is a sharp distinction between the holy, the ordinary and the unholy. The sacred are the things set apart by a peculiar emotional attitude, usually of respect and awe. They are imbued with special powers either advantageous or dangerous. They are not to be used in an everyday utilitarian context, but are reserved for special occasions and hedged about with taboos and restrictions of all sorts.

The important question in the study of 'Devara Kaadu' or 'Sacred Forests or Groves' therefore becomes 'What is the source of the sacred'? The question is baffling but not incapable of solution. The sacred thing is something tangible – a physical object such as plant, a flag, a color, a word, a place, an act, the sun, the moon, the wind, the fire, the water and what not. Hence the observer has too frequently tried to derive the sacred from the things themselves.

To some cow is sacred, to some tree is sacred, to some fire is sacred, to some sun is sacred, and to some all natural things are sacred. So the sacredness deals with the object which a particular group worships. So there is cow worshiping religion, tree worshiping religion, sun worshiping religion, fire worshiping religion, etc.

### SACRED GROVES – CONCEPT AND ORIGIN

Since the dawn of civilization or advent of Homo sapiens, different forms of worship have evolved. The objects of worship itself differ from place to place. But the main underlying principle of worship has been propitiating to Nature and Environment. The early man has always held Nature in awe as he realized that he has to depend on Nature for his basic needs of air, water, food and light; perhaps therefore the early man held the Nature in great respect, fierce devotion and started worshiping Nature as god – the powerful and giver. An aura of sacredness thus started towards all the elements in Nature easily perceptible such as Forest, River, Trees, Mountains, Sun, and Moon etc.

As the people grew in numbers so also grew their hunger for basic needs and so also their attitudes; along with desire for food also grew the desire for other carnal necessities from the very surroundings that they held sacred. This led to indiscriminate tapping of Nature.

Sacred Groves existed in different parts of the world such as in South America, Africa, Australia, Greece, and Rome, even in France, Germany and in almost all parts of Asia. The concept of Sacred Groves was not limited to any particular place or race of a community.

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In Indian culture, there is a special identity and religiosity given to the trees, animals, plants and even birds and insects. Sacred Groves and its habitant can be found in all regions. SARANE in Bengal and Bihar, VARAN in Rajasthan, DEVARI in Maharashtra, KAAVU in Kerala and Tamilnadu are specially identified places held in great esteem and revered as such even now.

It is estimated in India the Sacred Groves extended to about 39,063 hectares consisting of about 4125 Groves approximately. In Karnataka, all districts have forest covers earmarked as Devara-Kaadu and have local names such as ‘KAN’ in Uttara Kannada district, ‘NAGABANA’ in Dakshina Kannada, ‘GRAMA DEVATA’ Forest Hassan district. Cattle wealth is held sacred in all places and ‘GOMALAS’ - grazing field for cattle exclusively is a distinct feature in all towns and villages.

In Kodagu, according to some legendary perception, ‘KADAMBA TREE’ (Anthocephanecadamba) associated with Chandravarma is considered as progenitor of Kodavas who belonged to Kadamba dynasty has been held sacred and worshiped; thus the early indigenous race of Kodagu were worshipers of their ancestors and the Nature and in memory of these, ‘Devarakaadus’ were nurtured in each and every village. Each village has its own meadows, a Temple, an Ambala, and each and every household a Kaimada a memorial for the ancestor. The ancestors realized the importance of Forest wealth and to preserve the wealth and to see that the succeeding generations do not exploit this to satisfy their greed, an aura of fierce discipline and devotion with religiosity symbols were created. Certain festivities and ceremonies were held in such areas with religious fervor, devotion and cooperation is being continued even now. Such practices have helped in preserving the Devara-Kaadus in Kodagu to a substantial extent compared to being less prevalent in other parts of the world.

### **UNIQUENESS OF ‘DEAVARA KAADUS’ OF KODAGU**

Sacred Groves or sanctified sanctuary or ‘Devarakaadu’ in local parleys can be found in many parts of world over and indeed in every state in India. With the passage of time and due to degradation as a result of improper attention, such sanctuaries are fast disappearing. Devarakaadus in Kodagu has still retained some of its flavour and distinct characteristics. In fact, it stands quite apart from the rest of the Devarakaadus elsewhere.

- a. As per Forest Department’s statistics, there are about 1214 Devarakaadus with coverage of 2500 hectares in Kodagu district; nowhere else can one find in such large numbers and in terms of area. The total coverage is about 2 percent of the district. It is claimed as a world record.
- b. In terms of density there is one Devarakaadu for every 300 acres which is very rare.
- c. In 20 villages of the district each village has ten Devarakaadus.
- d. All indigenous communities unique in their way take part in each and every ritual, festival etc. conducted in Devarakaadu displaying harmony and comradere.
- e. The tribes and aborigines have identified more than 100 deities with Devarakaadus of their area of concern; this is also a world record.
- f. Each and every Devarakaadu has its own type of celebrations like folk games, folk arts, dances, songs, rituals as appropriate to the deities associated with the kaadu.
- g. Every Devarakaadu is full of rarest trace species of life forms and living creatures like birds, beatles, fowls, herbs and animals giving it a distinct flavour special to each kaadu.

The vastness of DevaraKaadu I Kodagu is illustrated by the following details available in Forest Department Records:

<b>Taluk</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Acres</b>
Virajpet	508	2,180
Somavarpet	400	2,860
Madikere	306	1,335
Total	1214	6,375

The quantity of Devarakaadus is quite large for a small district like Kodagu as compared to any such similar areas elsewhere in the world.

As per Forest Department records, the five major Devarakaadus in Kodagu districts are –

1. PaadiIgguthappaDevarakaadu of Kunjila village-358 acres.
2. EshwaraAppandriappaDevarakaadu of Katakari village-323 acres.
3. BasaveshwaraDevarakaadu of Valnur-Thyagathur village-304 acres.
4. MahavishnuDevarakaadu of Kopati village-208 acres.
5. AiyappaDevarakaadu of Madae village-141 acres.

The actual area of big farms needs to be updated. In Thakeri village of Somavarpet taluk a maximum of 17 Devarakaadus can be found. In about 39 villages there are more than 7 kaadus per each village. Maximum numbers can be found in Valnur, Keerkodali and Haleri.

In Virajpet taluk, maximum number of Devarakaadus can be found in Kuttaandi, Mythaadi, Hudikeri, Maggula, Bilagunda and Deavanageri villages.

In Madikeri taluk, maximum numbers of Devarakaadus can be found in Maragod, Kolakeri, Biligiri, Hosakeri, Madae and Kirundad villages.

The reason why the number varies in large numbers in each village is perhaps the earlier single integrated kaadus must have been divided into smaller eco units associated with local communities and their Deities.

## **VARIETY, DIVERSITY AND CLASSIFICATION**

Dr. Chandrakant and Sri M.G. Nagaraj have in their study of ‘Devarakaadus of Kodagu’ have arrived at some classifications according to certain characteristics inherent in various regions –

- 1 Basadis or Jina Forests – Temple properties. References are found in Archives in Madikeri and Mullure inscriptions.
- 2 Paisari Forests – These are controlled by Forest Department; however, maintained and protected by the local communities.
- 3 Holae Devarakaadu – Certain caste called Kembattis are guarding this and holdings identified with a variety of deities, among them female deity Pannangalathammae, Chaundi, Ayyappa are important.
- 4 Kaimadakaad or Kaaronakaad – Mausoleums are built (a pyramid like structure) in memory of the founder ancestor whom the Kodava call Karona and flora is developed around these structures. Such areas are found in many holdings of Kodava families.
- 5 Suggikaad (Suggibana) – Certain trees or plants developed as mini forests and dedicated to certain deities as per local indigenous practices. Majority of these can be found in Somavarpet taluk. Daily poojas are performed to Goddess Parvathi and Saptamatha. Along with that we can find Heddevarabana, Gramadevathabana and Beeredevvarabana.
- 6 Certain forest areas are donated to various Matts by the erstwhile Rajas of Kodagu; mostly confined to Virajpet and Somavarpettaluks.
- 7 Certain clans called ‘Jamma Mapilae’ (converted ethnic race) are maintaining certain areas of forest land within their own entitled holdings. These are called ‘Pallikaad’ and can be found in Srimangala, Ponnampet, Mythaadi, Chamiyala and in some other places.

- 8 ‘Poo Kaad’ (Flower Grove) – Many a type of flower bearing trees grown since the 14th Century A.D., dedicated to deity ‘Poovistana’ (God of flowers) can be found in temple towns of Bhagamandala, Paalur and other places.
- 9 Beerabana (Veeravana) – Groves dedicated to great warriors (in their names); again these are confined to certain families who have produced many warriors of repute.

The above mentioned classification illustrates the uniqueness of various types of Devarakaadus of Kodagu which is maintained by each family (Okka): village, the local bodies or communion of people as a part of their inherent culture integrated with Nature.

### **DEITIES ASSOCIATED WITH VARIOUS DEVARA KAADUS**

In the three principal taluks (Virajpet, Somavarpet and Madikeri), Deities identified and method of worship, festivals vary in each region something peculiar areas of each place-often influenced by the neighbouring border areas and the practices followed there.

Thus the Devarakaadus around Virajpet taluk is mostly influenced by the bordering Kerala. Names of Lord Ayyappa, Goddess Bhagavati, Bhadrakali are common and in majority; in addition to local names of MahadevaBasaveswara, Durga and Maramma. The temple and other buildings architecture styles resembles those of Kerala style. The worshiping practice is also imitative of Kerala. Village Oracle (man possessed by spirit) speaks in Malayalam language.

In Madikeri taluk, mixed influence of Kerala and adjoining Dakshina Kannada is seen. Names like Sampaje, Thodikana, Baathrae, Nagabana, Panjuruli, Korthi, Shastha are very common.

In Somavarpet taluk – similarly, the names and practices are influenced by the bordering plain areas like Hassan and Mysore. Worshiping of Eshwara and Parvathi and its local forms like Subbamma, Kenchamma, Kunthamma etc is thus the practice. In these areas the village or family head if chieftain is addressed as chief instead of ‘Thakka’ as found in Virajpet and Madikeri taluks. The folk arts, songs, festivals etc also bear resemblance to the respective neighbouring influences.

The Devarakaadus of Kodagu, harbours various types of flora and fauna, that exist from time immemorial. These play a vital role seemingly and unseemingly in our lives. Certain life forms which exist in Kodagu are quite distinctive and particular to this region not found anywhere else in the country. Wildlife experts from the Oxford forest organization after conducting extensive studies for well over three years have expressed the opinion that though Devarakaadus occupy small percentage of land area it has about 45 percent of various species plants, 36 percent of various birds and 18 percent of other species of fungi etc. Though wild life of the kind of Elephants and Tigers are found very rarely in Devarakaadus, their smaller cousins are surviving in large numbers. With the advent of coffee estates this kind of native trees and animals are confined only in smaller areas like Devarakaadus. Trees like silver oak, Mangium are found around these estates and the other local varieties are dwindling along with the life form which it supports. The future generation will never be able to see these in course of time if Devarakaadus are not properly preserved. Sanctuaries like Nagaraholae, Brahmagiri forests, Puspagiri forests, and Bio farms around Talakavery are protected and preserved through government support and other agencies. But this is not sufficient. The 1214 numbers of Devarakaadus in villages should be looked after properly with support from all concerned.

Economic aspects – The plants grown in Devarakaadus have great medicinal values both for humans and animals. Highly valuable trees like Devadar, Beeti, Agini, Jack fruit trees are felled after their life period and are given to Forest Department and Temple trusts. They are used for structures, furniture etc. Many creepers, ferns, cane are useful in many ways in our life. Many fruits also have nutritional and medicinal values. By and large the forest cover itself serves as a storage reservoir and buffer of water recycling as it is capable of sustaining any amount of rain absorbing and recycling.

Now the ecology of Kodagu has completely changed. How different Kodagu would have been had our grandfathers been alive today! If we had them at the forefront of the environment movement, they would then have prevailed upon us to set an example if simple, ecologically sound living for the benefit of all people. Our forefathers were environment prophets whose precious lives were reserved to safeguard the ecological balance on the earth.

Reasons for disappearance of Devarakaadus are many fold. Many Devarakaadus have been encroached by migrants from outside district, coffee cultivators, land grabbers and some have been converted into small village units by some communities. These have been done right under the nose of the very guardians of the Devarakaadus. The timber has been used for providing shelter to the socially and economically deprived. The indifference of local people, family and village heads, forest department officials, government and panchayats have added to the woes of the Devarakaadu. Lack of co-ordination between the revenue officials and forest officials and their callous attitude is another factor. Some vested interests have taken political mileage out of the large influx of migrant labourers of coffee estates and the like. Post 1888, Devarakaadus have been given the status as protected forest and declared as belonging to the department; thus no single family can claim absolute right over these forests. (Probably at best they can maintain them as free lease holds). In spite of this no action is being taken on the land grabbers. Many protected forests have been misused, abused and worst vandalized. Entire ecosystem has almost disappeared. Devarakaadus have gradually lost their pristine purity and glory. Rare species of plants, creatures and other life forms have disappeared. Even the festivities associated with certain Devarakaadus have lost their importance and veneration once practiced as community of yore. The government and locals should.....save the forests.

### **THE [hidden] WEALTH AND BENEFITS OF DEVARA KAADU’S TREASURE**

Bio Treasure – Many of the domestic and commercial crops like pepper, cardamom, turmeric, ginger, root – vegetables like sweet potato, arum colocasia, yam etc had their origin in forests of yesteryears. To find out remedies to get rid of the usual diseases those affect these crops, one has to find out from the forests plants the ‘Genes’ required. The infamous ‘Wilt’ disease can be removed by researching into the forest varieties. Through extensive research in Bio – Tech various patents can be made and rights sold. It is believed that not so long ago a certain disease that affected paddy crop was got rid of using a good breed from a wild sanctuary in Kerala.

### **CONCLUSION**

In Devarakaadus of Kodagu various types of Ferns, Fungi and tree moss are found unique to the region. These are very valuable for processing various types of herbal medicines. In fact these forms of species are needed for maintaining eco balance in plant kingdom. Certain types of mushroom xylaria, Ganoderma have been found in many Devarakaadus. There is lot of demand for these in the world market. Gainful use can be made of by the preservation of forest for further propagation of these life forms.

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