



# Worship and Ecological Transformations in an Endangered Sacred Grove

P S Soorya

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**Summary:** *The article describes Keezheveetil Kaavu, a 200-year-old sacred grove in Thiruvananthapuram district threatened by highway construction. It explores the family's commitment to continue ritual worship and preservation of the natural legacy of the Kaavu despite highway construction all around it.*

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*“There were fish on the streams, and the beautiful fallow paddy field was the best memory of our childhood. Now it’s really sad to see the place like this.”*

- Supriya, Member of Keezheveetil family, 2024

## **Keezheveetil Kaavu**

Keezheveetil *Kaavu* in Attingal town is situated in a lowland near a paddy field. The *kaavu* is maintained by the Keezheveetil family. One of the oldest members of the family, Padmini Amma, said, “The *kaavu* is around 200 years old and known for seven generations of the family.” The *kaavu* was said to have started with small naga idols by the family hundreds of years ago; with time, the *kaavu* started to have new deities like Ganapathy, Yakshi, and Sastavu.

The recent construction of a 29-kilometre stretch of raised multilane highway by NHAI in the area cuts through fallow paddy fields and has required the Keezheveetil family to leave their family homes. The road building and construction have resulted in a change in the environment.

The only reason the family comes here now is the pull of the family *kaavu*. Even without a clear path to the *kaavu* any more, the family continues to take care of the grove by performing rituals and maintaining the ecosystem. Today, the grove stands alone amid the changes, striving to keep its spiritual and ecological importance.

The current secretary, Sreejith, talks about his concerns about *Kaavu’s* future. “The family is concerned about the future of the *kaavu*. But currently, we are doing everything we could do.” The entire landscape changed due to the new road. It divides the paddy field and the nearby ecosystem. This *kaavu*, like any other sacred grove, is a habitat for diverse flora and fauna. The construction and human

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<sup>1</sup> Supriya , a family member of Keezheveedu, September, 2024

intervention resulted in many animals and birds leaving the area.



Figure. The new road is being constructed near Keezheveetil *kaavu*, *Kaavu* is behind the broken building. Image: P S Soorya, 2024

## **Sacred Groves**

Human beings have worshipped various wonders and mysteries in nature for many reasons.<sup>2</sup> They revered mountains, rivers, and trees and considered them divine. The need for survival made these elements in nature sacred. Awareness and protection of these resources are seen in many communities. Sacred groves, which have existed all over the world, are one of the prime examples of human conservation of nature by accommodating flora and fauna with often water sources within them<sup>3</sup>.

Sacred groves are sanctified patches of forests protected by the strength of religious beliefs as abodes of the deities present there. Sacred groves do not have any particular architectural form or infrastructure. The deities are placed in open spaces within the groves; they may vary in size and shape and are seen with or without carvings in them. Cutting branches or trees in the grove is restricted because it is believed that it leads to bad omens for

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<sup>2</sup> E. Unnikrishnan, Sacred Groves of North Kerala: Eco-Folklore Study (Mal.) (Samskriti, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Mithun C. Sekhar, Naga Worship in Central Kerala: An Archaeological and Ethnographical Study (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 2015)

the family. The curse can result in diseases like leprosy, blindness, and pustules all over the body. The devotees believe that the purity of their mind and body is essential for entering the sacred grove.

These groves are generally known to almost all the states in India by different names and locations. These are seen in the Himalayas, Northeast India, the highlands of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. In Kerala, they are known as *kaavu*.

### **Kerala's Sacred Groves (*Kaavu*)**

Sacred groves are distributed in almost all the districts of Kerala. They are mostly concentrated in Alappuzha, Palakkad, Thrissur, and some districts in Northern Kerala<sup>4</sup>. The word *kaavu* refers to a conglomeration of different species of herbal or non-herbal plants and different species of fauna<sup>5</sup>. Sacred groves in Northern Kerala are called *Theyyakkaavukal* (dedicated to the ritual art form theyyam), *Vayalorakkaavukal* (sacred grove near the agricultural field), *Kadalarakkaavukal* (sacred grove near the sea), and *Thekkankeeralathilekaavukal* for the central part of Kerala and *Vanampradeshathekaavukal* (sacred grove near the forest) for southern Kerala<sup>6</sup>. These groves are home to various plants, reptiles, birds, and butterflies. Sacred groves are more than just a worshipping space, they're more about an ecological habitat.

### **Connecting Ecology and Beliefs**

Sacred groves have existed all over the world, and are one of the prime examples of human conservation of nature by accommodating flora and fauna with often water sources within them<sup>7</sup>. Religious practices have preserved an estimated 100,000-150,000 sacred groves across India, ensuring they remain biodiverse habitats home to an array of endangered species.

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<sup>4</sup> Sekhar, Naga Worship in Central Kerala (2015).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

Scientists say cultural traditions and community leadership are playing a critical role in boosting conservation efforts and increasing green cover in India, which is losing forests at an alarming rate.<sup>8</sup>

In India, despite the increase in human population, sacred groves have survived under a variety of ecological situations<sup>9</sup>. The sacred groves are a treasure house of medicinal and aromatic plants. Medical plants are usually connected to religion and seen as sacred. Ancestors, even without scientific knowledge or deep understanding, understood the idea of conserving these plants. While talking with a *Pulluvan* community member, the person said, "There are myths like snakes purify the air; it's just the simple interpretation of how *kaavu* help in purifying the air."

The nutrients generated in the groves find their way into the adjoining agroecosystems too, like in the paddy fields, coconut, tapioca, and rubber plantations. Not only plants, but *kaavus* are also an approach towards protecting the living beings in nature. Humans considered the animal world as superior to them and saw it with fear. An animal cult is shaped when a god is respected or worshipped utilising a representative animal<sup>10</sup>.

Vasudevan Thantri pointed out that "almost all Hindu gods are associated with animals, birds, and creatures as their vehicles (*vahanas*). Not only snakes, even the smallest of rats, but the biggest animals like elephants and birds come under Hindu mythology. Here religion or belief is not a prime idea; it's about protecting nature." This concept is to promote harmony in nature to maintain the ecosystem.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Nikhil Kumar, "How Religious Worship Is Boosting Conservation in India," *BBC Future*, July 26, 2022

<sup>9</sup> P. Ramakrishnan, K. G. Sivaswamy, and U. M. Chandrashekhara, eds., *Conserving the Sacred: For Biodiversity Management* (Enfield: Science Publishers, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Emily Teeter, *Ritual and Religion in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

<sup>11</sup> Laxman Singh Kandari, Vinod Kumar Bisht, Meenakshi Bhardwaj, et al "Conservation and Management of Sacred Groves, Myths and Beliefs of Tribal Communities: A Case Study from North India," *Environmental Systems*

The customs and rituals will have regional variations in the *kaavus*<sup>12</sup>. There are various rituals associated with the sacred groves in Kerala. Apart from this, the sacred groves harbour many endemic species. The devastating impact of pollution and deforestation can be restored by sacred groves. They improve the soil stability of the region and act as a soil binder.

## Origin and Local Legend

Every sacred grove has stories relating to its origin. Usually, they have a certain supernatural origin. These stories also reveal the links between sacred groves and historical events and personalities. Generally, the name of a sacred grove may closely relate to a person, family, or certain character specific to the locality. Most of the *kaavus* are known by their family names, like Mannarasala *Nagakaavu*, Pambinmekkat *Nagakaavu*, Amedamangalam *Sarppakkaavu*, etc. Pambinmekkat is a prime example of such a supernatural origin. When it comes to magical rites, Mekkatumana was seen as top-notch. However, the family faced financial issues. The distressed eldest Namboothiri thought to medicate for 12 years at Thiruvanchukulam temple. The Naga king Vasuki appeared before him and advised him on how to wipe out poverty. From that day onwards, serpents became the presiding deity of the mana later known as Pambumekattumana. The Namboothiri homestead is believed to still house the precious gem received from the serpent king Vasuki<sup>13</sup>.

## Kaavu Deities and Associations

Sacred groves in Kerala are known by different names based on the name and nature of the deities present there. Sacred groves in Kerala have been broadly classified into *Sarppakavu*, Bhadrakali

*kaavu* or *Durgakaavu*, *Ayyappankaavu*, *Yakshikaavu*, *Madankaavu*, *Mrgadaiva kaavu*, *Gulikankaavu*, *Thayipparadevata kaavu*, *Ammadaiva kaavu*, etc. All the communities of Brahmanical religion in central Kerala have *Sarppakavu* in their family-occupied landscape<sup>14</sup>. In Kerala, snake worship has long been a major part of religious life; testimony of this goes back as far as the eighth-century<sup>15</sup>.



Fig 2. Naga Iconography with Chitrakoodams, Chalad Temple, Kannur. Image: P S Soorya, 2023

Many families in Kerala depend upon the snake's blessing for prosperity. The snake deities are usually seen in anthropomorphic forms, usually in odd numbers like 3, 5, 7, etc. *Nagakanni*, *Nagaraja*, *Nagayakshi*, and *Nagachamundi* are the common deities present there. Naga deities are some of the grove deities with iconographic form. *Chitrakoodams* are also seen in almost all *kaavus*. *Chitrakoodams* are pyramid-shaped stone structures that are built between two deities. Manikandan, a *Pulluvan* singer, said, "During certain ceremonies, the spirits of the snakes are invoked and invited to reside within these structures. This dimension adds to their spiritual significance." Vasudevan Thantri, a Naga ritual-performing priest, in a personal interview, said, "In the past, there was no platform; the only thing present was either a stone sculpture or chitrakoodam. In some groves, you will also find the installation of Sivalinga. In Kerala, snake worship is mostly based on Saivate beliefs."

Research 3 (2014): 16.

<sup>12</sup> D. Deb, K. Deuti, and K. C. Malhotra, "Sacred Grove Relics as Bird Refugia," *Current Science* 73 (1997):815–817.

<sup>13</sup> Kottarathil Sankunni, *Aitihyamala: Malayalam, Parts 1 to 8*, Internet Archive, November 23, 2011, pp. 80–99.

<sup>14</sup> Sekhar, *Naga Worship in Central Kerala* (2015).

<sup>15</sup> Unnikrishnan, *Sacred Groves* (1995).



Nagaraja and Nagayakshi (Keezhevittil kaavu). Image: P S Soorya, 2023

## Snake Rituals

The installation of snake deities in *Kaavu* is done through a ritual called *Sarppapratista*. Detailed descriptions of installation and iconography can be seen in the book '*Shilaparatnam*'<sup>16</sup>. *Ayilyam* is the birth star of the snakes, and the ritual of *Ayilya pooja* is performed in sacred groves. Various offerings are made on this day to the serpent deities. *Ashtanaga pooja* is another ritual associated with the serpent cult in Kerala; it is done to remove snake curses. This for the appeasing of eight divine snakes in Brahmanical texts. *Anantasesa*, *Vasuki*, *Taksaka*, *Padma*, *Mahapadma*, *Gulika*, *Shanghapala*, and *Karkkodaka* are commonly known as *Ashtanagas*<sup>17</sup>.

*Palpayasahomam* is performed to remove the curse by the accidental killing of snakes in this or past life; *Sarpasamskaram* is also done for the same reason. This is done by a priest by calling the spirits of the snakes. One of the major rituals is the *Sarpabali*. It is considered the most sacred and utmost ritual for Naga deities and is similar to Vedic rituals. *Sarpabali* is a kind

<sup>16</sup> C. S. Jayakumari Kunjamma, *Nagaradhana Keralathil* (Karyavattom: University of Kerala, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Sekhar, *Naga Worship in Central Kerala* (2015).

of worship performed to cure ailments like skin diseases and bring good luck for getting good life partners and progeny and for the well-being of devotees<sup>18</sup>. After *Sarppapratista*, *Noorum Palum* is a major ritual done for the snake deities. According to myths, Lord Parashurama is the one who asked to do this ritual for the deities<sup>19</sup>. This ritual is performed in all parts of Kerala.



Sarpakalam at Keezhevittil kavu. Image: P S Soorya, 2023

*Kalamezhuthu* and *Pulluvan Pattu* are other common rituals at *Kaavus*. Both are usually done by the *Pulluvan* community. *Kalamezhuthu* is drawing on the floor with coloured powders. *Pulluvan pattu* is the narration of naga stories through songs. Usually, *Pulluvan pattu* plays along with *Kalamezhuthu* and other snake rituals. Apart from this, there are rituals like *theyyam* performed in *kaavu*, especially in North Malabar.

The *Pulluvan* artist, Manikandan, added in the conversation that "no rituals are performed on the breeding and mating times of snakes because they can affect the snake habitat." The mythology of Parashurama, which speaks about providing space for Nagas in every home, may also be interpreted as an ancient form of conservation ideology for animals and

<sup>18</sup> Sekhar, *Naga Worship in Central Kerala* (2015).

<sup>19</sup> Kunjamma, *Nagaradhana Keralathil* (2012).

nature. Fear of snakes and other creatures typically deters people from entering these groves, which minimises the disturbance of human interference in the natural habitat. The main ideology behind these groves was to protect the habitat of the living beings there. *Sarppakaavus* are symbols of a human's peaceful coexistence with nature and fellow creatures. Apart from the occasional prayers and rituals, human interventions in these ecosystems were practically absent. Thus, religious beliefs indirectly promoted the conservation of natural resources.

### **Threat to Sacred Groves**

Sacred groves are showing signs of weakening and decreasing in terms of cultural, biological, and ecological integrity. Different kinds of clearing rituals, in which residing gods were shifted from the sacred grove to another spot, appeared to take place regularly. They were advertised to the public, and priests supported the clearing of the groves, all in the name of religion. Moreover, these religious rituals not only supported the destruction of groves but simultaneously boosted people's devotion to the shifted deities. When the population increased, more houses came, and there was no more space for these creatures. A lack of awareness in terms of long-term future benefits has also destroyed sacred groves. In *Keezheveetil Kaavu*, the construction of roads and increased human intervention resulted in pollution in water bodies and paddy fields near the grove.

For providing necessary protection to the sacred groves and maintaining their natural identity. The surrounding village communities need to be educated and guided to sustain the sanity of the existing groves.

Chandrasekhara, in his article "Cultural and Conservation Values of Sacred Groves of Kerala," points out the importance of documentation of all the sacred groves and taking them up on a high-priority basis so that management and conservation programs for these threatened groves can be initiated. He also adds that

awareness-building regarding the importance of sacred groves is the first and foremost step needed to be taken to maintain these traditional values, practices, and beliefs among the youth.<sup>20</sup>

Rapid modernisation and the new generation may see sacred groves as a superstition, but it's necessary to understand the science behind it. Recently, steps have been taken for the preservation of this environmentally sensitive area. Government aid was also declared for the owner of the grove to preserve and protect it, especially by the Kerala Forest Department.

The story of the *Keezheveetil Kaavu* is not just about a grove; it illustrates the ongoing struggle to preserve heritage and biodiversity in an ever-changing world.

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<sup>20</sup> U.M. Chandrashekara, "Cultural and Conservation Values of Sacred Groves of Kerala, India," *International Journal of Ecology and Environmental Sciences* 37, no. 3 (October 28, 2023).

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