

Sacred Groves and Cultural Practice in Kodagu

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Abstract

The study of the relationship between man and nature is complex and frequently their approaches depend on the scale and the discipline methodology. From this interaction born different pairs of concepts are society and environment; culture and nature; social sciences and natural sciences. We advocate here for an interdisciplinary approach and to understand those pairs as a whole, what some authors have called the humans in nature or the social ecological systems. Inside these whole pairs concepts grow the different material and non material, direct and indirect social ecological linkages as the ecological knowledge, the use and management of the ecosystems and their services, the beliefs over the nature. The district of Kodagu has some peculiarities, compared with other Karnataka states is small in terms of population and surface. In Kodagu coffee is one of the major drivers of the regional economy, the landscape, and even the cultural identity of the district.

Keyword: nature, ecology, culture, coffee, population etc

Introduction:

The study of the relationship between man and nature is complex and frequently their approaches depend on the scale and the discipline methodology. From this interaction born different pairs of concepts are society and environment; culture and nature; social sciences and natural sciences. We advocate here for an interdisciplinary approach and to understand those pairs as a whole, what some authors have called the humans in nature or the social ecological systems. Inside these whole pairs concepts grow the different material and non material, direct and indirect social ecological linkages as the ecological knowledge, the use and management (traditional or not) of the ecosystems and their services, the beliefs over the nature.¹ The district of Kodagu has some peculiarities, compared with other Karnataka states is small in terms of population and surface. In Kodagu coffee is one of the major drivers of the regional economy, the landscape, and even the cultural identity of the district. Having own history independently of the neighboring districts, Kodagu became part of Karnataka State in 1956 and still now conserves a noticeable identity.²

¹ Gadgil. M and Vartak. V D. (1975)., The sacred groves of India: A plea for continued conservation Journal of Bombay Natural History Science Vol 72. Pp 314-320

² Kushalappa, M. 'The Early Coorgs: A history of early Kodagu and its people (A History of Kodagu) (Volume 2) December 2013

Since time immemorial men have tried to conserve nature in all ways possible. Be it through protecting the endangered plant and animal species, through protests and revolutions against deforestation, man has always remained in touch with nature. This bonding had in the ancient times led humans to worship Mother Earth, offer prayers and blessings thanking nature for providing him with all necessities of life. And these offerings were made not in temples or mandirs but in the open space, within the heart of nature. Hence forests were considered the ideal place for performing poojas and other traditional worshipping glorifying the gods and goddesses of nature. As generations passed, people got accustomed to this ritual and those places where they performed these rites became sacred and spiritual.³ In the later years, people gave these closed enclosures a name sacred grove; therefore “sacred groves are tracts of virgin forest with rich diversity, which have been protected by the local people for centuries for their cultural and religious beliefs and taboos that the deities reside in them and protect the villagers from different calamities.” Mostly it is tribal people and the locals residing near the sacred groves who have taken the initiative in carrying forward this tradition of conserving nature through sacred groves.⁴ Though the practice evolved out of a symbiotic relation between humans and nature, today sacred groves are one reason why virgin forests exist in different parts of the country. These areas are untouched by man and even plucking a leaf is thought to bring about disaster to mankind.⁵

A form of nature worship, the sacred groves are called ‘Sacred Natural Sites’ by *IUCN*. Many countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and America are reportedly home to a number of sacred groves. In India, sacred groves are found along the Northeast Himalayan region, Eastern Ghats, Central Plateau region and Western deserts. It is believed that every sacred grove has a story to tell, it carries with it legends, myths and folklore passed in its purest form over generations. In fact, a sacred grove is a link between the past and the present. It plays an integral role in enriching the modern society in cultural, religious and ethnic heritage. Today this outcome of religious beliefs is also an important means of conserving biodiversity.⁶

Sacred groves are also good sources of water bodies. In Kerala and Karnataka, groves are supposed to provide nutrient rich water to adjacent agricultural fields and spice gardens. Sacred groves help in controlling temperature, provide fire resistance and even promote a healthy plant animal interaction. Sacred groves also help in the conservation of soil reduces the erosive force of nature, maintains hydrological cycle

³ V. M. Ravi Kumar, *Evolution of Forest policies in Colonial Madras Presidency (Andhra), 1870-1947: A Study in Ideas and Legal Discourses* (Unpublished Ph,D thesis, University Hyderabad, 2006, p.134.

⁴ Ibid. Pp. 135-136

⁵ Nanjundaiah, . C., *Forests Environment and Local Community - A Case Study of Coorg, (Kodagu) District*, July 2004. Pp.23-24

⁶ Khan M L, Khumbongmayum A D and Tripathi R S. 2008 The Sacred Groves and Their Significance in Conserving Biodiversity - An Overview. *International Journal of Ecology and Environmental Sciences* Vol 34 (3) Pp 277-291

and aids the natural dispersal of seeds of useful species. Well known as a potential natural vegetation site collection and removal of any material from a sacred grove is prohibited.⁷

Kodagu district in the state of Karnataka is one the greenest regions not only in India, but in the world; with over 75% of its geographical area under tree cover, the green-scape has contributed to make this region one of the most productive areas in terms of agriculture, plantations and ecotourism.⁸ The district is the largest shade coffee growing region in the world and produce like honey, mandarin pepper, cardamom, timber and non timber products portray the natural richness of the region.⁹ The green scope not only provides direct economic benefits in terms of above mentioned resources, but provides life sustaining ecological benefits which are collectively called ecosystem services, like hydrological services of river Cauvery which sustains communities downstream in South India, carbon sequestration, climate control, and biodiversity conservation.¹⁰ In the recent years, Kodagu has become an important destination of ecotourism which is primarily nature based. So, the green cover has contributed to evergreen development not only of Kodagu but the entire region of South India.

Kodagu is very unique traditional landscape management practices supplemented with nature friendly farming practices have ensured that forests and trees are managed as an integral part of sustainable development. The foundation of this rich evergreen home is in the practice of nature and ancestral worship by local communities. Kodagu is not only the land of largest shade grown coffee farms, but also the land with high density of sacred forests. Sacred groves which are called *Devakadu*, and associated traditional ancestral houses are the foundations of a unique *Kodava* culture which is now recognized world over as one of the most nature friendly practices.¹¹

Religious and traditional beliefs, cultural mores, and practices play a crucial role in the conservation of environment and biodiversity. The present paper describes a case study of two sacred groves in Kodagu District. Sacred groves are patches of land that are communally protected with religious zeal. A preliminary survey was conducted in these to study their role in biodiversity conservation. The data collected included the general information regarding the SGs and the associated deity, nearest human habitation, access to them, and their floral and faunal diversity. Ethno medicinal property of plants was collected from the

⁷ Chandrakanth, M.G. and Jeff Romm., 1991, Sacred Forests, Secular Forests Policies and Peoples Action. *Natural Resource Journal*, pp. 741-756.

⁸ Chandrakanth, M.G., Bhat, M. G. and Accavva, M. S. (2004) 'Socio-economic changes and sacred groves in South India: Protecting a community-based resource management institution', *Natural Resources Forum* 28 (2): pp.102-111.

⁹ Ibid.pp.106-107

¹⁰ Richter, G. (1870) *Gazetteer of Coorg: Natural Features of the Country and the Social and Political Condition of its Inhabitants*. Reprinted 2002, New Delhi: Low price, pp.116-118

¹¹ Uthappa, K.G. (2004) *Land Tenure, Land Holding, and Tree Rights of Kodagu*. Ponnampet: Kodagu Model Forest Trust.

indigenous communities.¹² Many taboos are associated with both the SGs, which help in managing resources well through ritual representation. Different festivals are organized, where the local communities reaffirm their commitment to the forest and the deity. Sacred groves, in general, are a valuable tool of biodiversity conservation. But people's changing attitudes, erosion of traditional beliefs, and human impact have caused degradation of sacred groves over the years. Their conservation would not be possible without the active participation of the local people. By improving their living standards and by giving benefits of conservation to them, long-term conservation goals in these SGs can be achieved.

The Nature–Man–Spirit Complex:

For a couple of thousand years or more farsighted observers have been impressed with the changes man is making in his environment." A new earth is in process of coming into being, so far as the things man can affect are concerned. What kind of a world will our children have to live in? As a partial help in answering this question let us list some of the things for which man is responsible. Our relationship with nature has historically been one of imbalance and overuse. Nearly every step in human history has unfortunately been accompanied with a leap in environmental degradation.¹³ At first, humans were incredibly in tune with their surroundings. Nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes used to roam the lands, following the ebb and flow of the seasons. These tribes had a measurable impact on the environment, but their influence was relatively manageable due to their population size. With advancements in technology and agriculture though, humans began to find more efficient ways of sustaining themselves.¹⁴ These advancements allowed for more permanent settlements, which led to rapid population growth and a distancing from nature. As society evolved, populations grew and more and more resources were required to fuel the expansion. With breakthroughs in agriculture, settlements became more permanent and cities began to take shape. This shift to city life inadvertently led to a distancing from nature. While many people were still in-tune with nature on a subsistent level, the need for more and more resources began to change our regard for nature. Although our distancing from nature began several thousand years ago with advancements in agriculture and social order, it is the age of industry to which we owe our modern regard for nature.¹⁵

¹² Ormsby, A. A. and Bhagwat, S.A. (2010)., Sacred Forests of India: a strong traditional of community based natural resource management. *Environmental conservation* 37(3):320-326

¹³ Environment in Karnataka: A Status Report, Ecological Economics Unit, Vol. 34, No. 38 (Sep. 18-24, 1999), pp. 2735-2744, Published by: Economic and Political Weekly.

¹⁴ Harold Hartley., Perspectives: Man and Nature, American Scientist, Vol. 53, No. 1 (MARCH 1965), Published Sigma Xi, the Scientific Research Honor Society, pp. 127-137.

¹⁵ Man and Nature Source Scientific American, Vol. 16, No. 16 (April 20, 1867), Published Scientific American, A Division Of Nature America, P. 252

Humans are unique in that respect, which is the root of the problem.¹⁶ We are capable of understanding our influence over nature, but we tend to ignore the Earth's reaction to our presence. I am not arguing that we purposefully degrade nature, but that environmental degradation is an inherent trait of our population's perpetual progression. We know we are crippling the environment. We have the ability to do something about it. Therefore, we should make change where change is necessary.

Nature: If we take the component nature, it deals with the interaction between man and his environment. The question is, how does man exploit the environment with whatever productive technology he has at his command? The lower the efficiency of his technology, the lesser will be the quantum of energy produced. Thus, man will be more dependent on nature and on his gods.

Man: With every change in the relationship between man and his environment, there is a change in the man to man relationship. When technology increases, his energy – exploiting capacity increases.

Spirit: With every change in mans relationship with his environment and also in the man to man relationship, there is a corresponding change in mans relationship with his supernatural world or his gods and his spirits. His beliefs change, many of his religious practices die out. He is less afraid of God, and he is less dependent on God.¹⁷

The sum product of all the components of culture always remain constant, be it a hunting and gathering society or a highly industrialized one. The Nature – Man – Spirit Complex always remains a constant one. There is a reason for these views are as follows:

- 1) **Man's behaviour and activity affects physical environment:** Factors like climate, geography and biology have an existence independent of the social life of man. These factors can be modified by human social life. Man can change his climate and geographic surrounding by his existence and activity.
- 2) **Man's adjustment to environment makes individual biological survival possible.** At all times, human beings are in interaction with their environment. Through this continuous interaction, there emerge various patterns of adjustment. Some of these adjustments are successful viz. they allow individual biological survival and the social survival of the group as a unit. Bennet and Tumin view this as a definition of "successful adjustment to the environment".
- 3) **Human Beings use values and technology to change the environment to suit their goals.** The environment provides a set of conditions to which humans in groups are patterned to respond. They do this in ways that they feel are desirable. They use technology designed for the purpose. The pattern of adjustment of a group to the environment arises out of the interaction between

¹⁶ Walter P. Taylor., Man and Nature: A Contemporary View, The Scientific Monthly, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Oct., 1935), Published American Association for the Advancement of Science, pp. 350-362

¹⁷Man and Nature Source Scientific American, Vol. 16, No. 16 (April 20, 1867), Published Scientific American, A Division Of Nature America, P.365

- a) The environment
- b) Societal values and
- c) Available technology (social or material)¹⁸

Land use in Kodagu:

The climate and soil in the region are suitable for coffee cultivation, which is the most prominent land use occupying 29% of the land area of Kodagu district and nearly 60% in the study area. Pepper, cardamom, ginger and paddy are other important crops. Kodagu is believed to have undergone a rapid landscape transformation since the mid 19th century and 35% of its original evergreen forest area has been planted with coffee and the British started commercial timber harvesting from natural forests. This is believed to have brought about more severe landscape transformations than in the past. Cultivation of coffee also continued unabated in post-independence India and it soon became the major commercial enterprise.¹⁹ The increase in the area under coffee cultivation between 1977 and 1997 has resulted in a loss of forest habitat. However, due to the structural complexity and floristic diversity of trees, shaded coffee plantations are known to resemble the original forest and thereby have relatively high biodiversity. Therefore, coffee cultivation in Kodagu is an example of forest modification where the tree-cover is little altered - total tree-cover in the study area is 81%. Currently, government-owned protected areas occupy about 30% of the study area, 60% is under shade-grown coffee plantations and 2% is occupied by other tree covered land such as sacred forests (community conserved lands), Paisaris (community-use lands), *Jammas* (family-owned lands). Only 8% of the total area is not covered by trees, such as paddy fields. Although land tenure in Kodagu is complex the above categorization into tree covered and non-tree covered land is sufficient for the present study.

Coffee Cultivation and Impact on Sacred Groves:

Coffee has been cultivated in the Western Ghats of India for centuries, and is widely believed to have been introduced from the Yemeni port of Mocha by the Muslim saint, Baba Budan, in the 16th century. Sometime after its introduction, coffee cultivation was embraced by the Kodavas, the dominant community within the modern day district of Kodagu in Western Karnataka. Today, more than one third of India's coffee is grown in Kodagu district, making it the most important growing district in India, the world's fifth largest coffee producing country.²⁰

¹⁸M. Higashiyama., A Study of Henry David Thoreau-Man and Nature, The Thoreau Society Bulletin, No. 73 (FALL, 1960), pp. 4-5 The

¹⁹ Handbook of Karnataka – 2010, Chief Editor – Geelani, K.A.S, Karnataka Gazetteer Department, Dr. Ambedkar Veedhi, Bangalore 560001, India 2001, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and The Census of India. 2011

²⁰ Kodagu District Human Development Report, 2014, Kodagu Zilla Panchayat and Planning, Programme Monitoring and Statistics Department, Government of Karnataka 2014

The *Kodavas*, also known as Coorgs, are a close-knit social group, with renowned martial and agrarian traditions. The *Kodavas* generally consider themselves *Ksatriya* according to the system of Hindu *Varnas* and yet their elaborate rituals are closely aligned to forms of nature and ancestor worship rather than following strict *Vedic* principles. Under certain circumstances, related to their former hunting culture, the *Kodavas* would even conduct ceremonies symbolically uniting in marriage the spirits of killed tigers with the spirit of the hunter, highlighting the intimate relationship between *Kodava* culture and the wildlife living in their forest realm. Sacred groves, known as *devarakaadu*, continue to be maintained in their natural state amongst the coffee plantations. Each village has at least one *devarakaadu*, which is believed to be an abode of the gods, with strict laws and taboos against poaching and felling of trees. The groves are also an important storehouse of biodiversity in the district. Following the British annexation of Kodagu in 1834, large numbers of European planters began settling in the forested mountains to cultivate coffee, dramatically changing the economic and environmental management structures of Kodava society.

Kodagu is a coffee-growing district in the mountain range of the Western Ghats in India, which also has a high density of sacred forests one forest every 300 hectares - in the landscape. While the practice of maintaining sacred forests continues to be commonplace in Kodagu, the formal protected areas are a comparatively recent conservation measure taken by the Government. Today, both these practices exist simultaneously. This, therefore, provides an ideal situation for comparing and contrasting the relative effectiveness of the two systems for the conservation of biodiversity. Because of the long history of landscape modification in the district, the study area provides a promising location for examining long-term effects of landscape modification on biodiversity. The region maintains more than 80% of its land under tree cover, which distinguishes Kodagu from many other tropical landscapes that have faced severe forest fragmentation. This offers an excellent opportunity for comparison between the effects on biodiversity in fragmented landscapes in many tropical countries and those on biodiversity in modified forest landscape of Kodagu. Such information will be useful for formulating a biodiversity conservation strategy in the region and for recommending conservation management of other similar tropical landscapes.

The Sacred Grove is very closely tied up with the social life of the local people for varied reasons:

1. They feel protected, inspired and healed by them.
2. The local deity reigns completely. E.g. In the groves where is the presiding deity all over the tribal and rural area in Kodagu District, she owns all the trees and the rocks and flora and fauna around.
3. Traditions are followed for fear of invoking the anger of the deity. These traditions and social values have been followed by the local people for generations and they have helped to conserve the groves.
4. Annual rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices are performed by the villagers to appease the protecting deity and for the benefit of the village, the crops, the fields and forests.

Cultural and Ecological Dimensions of Sacred Groves in Kodagu:

Culture is of great significance to business and is a very critical component of business environment. Proper understanding of the cultural dimensions is very important for making important business decisions relating to product development, promotional efforts, human resource management, management of the social and political environment, etc. A company which sets out to do business in unfamiliar cultural environment may encounter several problems if proper home work is not done. Many multinational corporate agree that "cultural differences are the most significant and troublesome variables encountered by any multinational company."²¹ The failure of managers to comprehend fully these disparities have led to most international business blunders." There are varying definitions of culture. Culture, in its broadest definition, refers to that part of the total repertoire of human action (and its product) which is socially, as opposed to genetically, transmitted. A very popular definition is that of E.B. Tylor which reads "Culture of civilization is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". As Geert Hofstede, a noted Dutch writer and academic, has put it, "culture is the software of mind-the social programming hat runs the way we think, act and perceive ourselves and others". In other words, your brain is simply the hardware that runs the cultural programming.

The relationship between ecological and social system has been studied by several disciplines; Trying to link environment society and cross the gap created for excessive cognitive specialization have born during the last century different interdisciplinary disciplines such as human ecology, ecological economics, environmental history, political ecology, ethno ecology being ecology as the principal "infected focal point". Thus, the human and natural linkages have multiple approaches, depending in the discipline from which are analyzed. Also as we commented the scale of analysis influences the scenario. We take here two approaches of the society-nature relation and they would be applied during the development of the study: first through the study to resilient social-ecological systems carried out by Berkes and Folke and second, through the concept of appropriation from Toledo and rural metabolism.²²

The family tradition of Kodagu community is preserving institution of sacred groves in Western Ghats the world's hot spot of biodiversity in India. This study estimated that the low existence value of sacred grove forming 10 percent of the total economic value is due to (1) dilution of the *Jamma* land tenure enabling sale of lands to non 'Kodaga' community, (2) remunerative coffee prices leading to encroachment of sacred groves (3) in-migration of non 'Kodaga' ethnic community with little respect to institution of

²¹ Kushalappa, M., Kodagu in the Modern Era, since 1834, *A History of Kodagu* (Vol. 1)

²² Khan M. L., A. D. Khumbongmayum, & R. S. Tripathi, "The sacred groves and their significance in conserving biodiversity an overview". *International Journal of Ecology and Environmental Sciences*, 34(3), 277–291, (2008).

sacred grove.²³ Steps to revive the institution of sacred groves are being taken at the local level for which Governmental support is lacking. The sacred groves of Kodagu are serving the cause of forest ecology leading to climax forests. Further dilution will lead to ecological losses. The ecological economic indicator of dilution of institution is the low existence value of ten percent.²⁴

Caste is more perceived in rural areas where the traditional system is more alive. In Kodagu exist, among others, the following *jatis*: Kodovas, SC (Holeya – are the Adi Dravidar of Kodagu, Karnataka, Pale, Adi Dravida, Harijena, Nayakru, Parivara...), ST (as Yerava, Jenu- Kuruba and Betta-Kuruba), O.B.C (as Malayalis, Barber and Gowdas) and others. The three religious groups are, therefore, Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Socio-economically, in Kodagu we can broadly differentiate between large-scale farmers, smallholders and landless people; that usually correspond to the upper, middle and lower castes. Hence, usually, large-scale farmers are those that own the coffee estates and are Koorgis;²⁵

The age old cultural ethos of tribal communities which were responsible for preservation of the integrity of the sacred grove through ages is degrading at a fast rate. The traditional belief systems that were fundamental to the concept of sacred grove conservation are being considered as mere superstitions and gradually disappearing with one advent of modernization, urbanization and peoples changing aspiration. Modernization is posing a serious threat to the local traditions which are being challenged by urban culture and the sacred groves are losing their cultural importance for the younger generations of the people. There are instances where change in religious belief of people is responsible for the degradation of sacred groves.²⁶

In Kodagu, we can differentiate three kinds of settlements: cities, small villages and communities. The castes and socio-economical groups are dispersed on these geographical spaces. However, we have focused on one kind of settlement, the tribal communities, where there is less social disparity and the majority of their inhabitants are from the lowest caste and landless. In a given municipality (Panchayat) it can be not any community or have one, one or more than one community.

Conservation of Medicinal Plants in Sacred Groves of Kodagu:

The sacred forests are also of great forestry interest as indicators of the natural productivity of the region. The Coorg district has historical, diverse cultural, traditional, religious and environmental knowledge base in preserving and exploiting the treasure trove of medicinal plants for several years. The remarkable example is the maintenance of SGs in every village in the name of deity. Medicinal plants are largely found in the Coorg district especially in evergreen forests. There are 700 species found in Coorg used in Aurveda and

²³ Sacred groves of Virajpet taluka, Coorg, CCA/Kar/CS1/Coorg/Virajpet taluka/Sacred groves

²⁴ *Report On Inventory of Forest Resources of Kodagu District* (Karnataka), Government of India Ministry of Environment and Forests, Forest Survey of India Southern Zone Bangalore 1995 pp.1-119

²⁵ Kamath, Suryanath.U., (Ed), Gazetteer of India, Karnataka State, *Kodagu District*, Bangalore, 1993.

²⁶ Kushalappa, M. 'The Early Coorgs: A history of early Kodagu and its people (A History of Kodagu) (Volume 2) December 2013

Siddha system of medicines. Local communities and forest dwellers have the intimate knowledge about bio-resources including medicinal plants. Medicinal plants of Coorg are facing depletion and there are 204 medicinal plants in the list of endangered species due to deforestation.²⁷ Talakaveri and Irpu Rameshwara, SGs have been selected as medicinal plant conservation areas. Documentation of medicinal plants and their utilization in healing various diseases has been taken up by World Wide Fund (India) (WWF (I)) in the district. As observed by Kushalappa, a retired conservator of forests, medicinal plants and herbs inside the SGs are illegally exported to western countries.

- 1) The goals and objectives of the project were clearly understood by the team. Their reports indicate that both general and specific objectives concerned to this section have been well understood by them. Further each of them has also added aspects and components into the objectives that have evolved directly or indirectly through their course of work.
- 2) The problems of the district associated with the biodiversity and medicinal plants have been well elucidated by the team. When compared to the original document at the beginning of the project, a deeper and more complete understanding of the problems of conservation have been elucidated.
- 3) Most team members feel that their work related to documentation of medicinal plants is yet not complete.

Conclusion:

All the above indicate that the people of Kodagu though they belong to varied races and cultural groups and speak different languages, all appear to be together in a definite movement to protect their forests and their lands. This cannot be put down as a definite organized social movement. However, certain clear indications emerge viz.

- 1) The Kodagu people are all nature lovers and nature worshippers.
- 2) They strongly believe that the forests, their sacred groves, their mountains, and water bodies are all the abode of the gods.
- 3) They also feel that if these forests and groves are destroyed, it will be the end of them as a distinct identity.
- 4) There is among all of them a strong desire to save their environment.

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