

A REVIEW ON EXPLORING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SACRED GROVES IN VIRUDHUNAGAR DISTRICT

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian sub-continent has a very rich diversity of plant species in a wide range of ecosystems. There are about 17, 000 species of higher plants, of which approximately 8,000 species are considered medicinal and used by village communities, particularly tribal communities, or in traditional medicinal systems, such as the Ayurveda (Pei, 2001). Many of the wild plants are endemic and are found only in specific ecological niches. Due to the 250 per cent increase in human and livestock populations in the 20th century and the subsequent pressure on available land, which has led to deforestation and land degradation, many species or populations of species are now threatened with extinction, because their natural habitats are being destroyed. Almost all medicinal plant raw materials in India are collected from wild populations. This has led to the unsustainable exploitation of many of the plants. The growing interest in traditional herbal medicine will lead to a further increase in the demand for medicinal plants. Sacred groves are areas of forest in Tamil Nadu also known as Kovilkadu. Traditionally

that is conserved by local communities due to their religious, cultural or spiritual importance. They can be found in different regions in the world. These groves act as vital biodiversity hotspots, preserving local plant and animal species. They also play an important role in maintaining ecological stability, protecting water source and preventing soil erosion, creating environmental awareness, research and conservation studies. In Tamil Nadu's Virudhunagar district, sacred groves are an important part of the area's ecological and cultural landscape. These groves are maintained by local communities and traditional knowledge to prevent the cutting of trees and hunting of animal forms of exploitation are restricted. As from 2011, the Forest

Department of Tamil Nadu, in partnership with the C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre, recorded around 1,262 sacred groves throughout Tamil Nadu, with 431 of them situated in Virudhunagar district, encompassing a total land area of 556.58 hectares. In Virudhunagar district more specifically located Rajapalayam, Srivilliputhur and Vatrapp range of forest.

Common medicinal plants in Sacred Groves

Name of the sacred groves	Location	Specific plant names
Innam Meenakshipuram	Vembakkottai	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> (L.)
Ecological Sacred grove	Pandalgudi	<i>Mitragyna parvifolia</i> (Roxb.)
Sastha Kovil	Devadanam (Rajapalayam)	<i>Atalantia monophylla</i> (L.)
Valliyamman kovil	Virudhunagar	<i>Terminalia arjuna</i> (Roxb.)
Ramar kovil sacred grove	Rajapalayam	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> (L.)
Thavampetra nayakiamman kovil	Devadanam (Rajapalayam)	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> (L.)
Shenbaha thoppu	Srivilliputhur	<i>Michalia champaca</i> (L.)
Keelamadan sannathi	Vatrapp	<i>Eugenia jambolana</i> (L.)
Sundaramahalingam kovil	Sathuragiri (Srivilliputhur)	<i>Neolamarckia cadamba</i> (Roxb.)
Sangoothi karuppasamy kovil	Sattur	<i>Azadirachta indica</i> (L.)

Causes of Biodiversity loss

The main factors leading to the decline of biodiversity in the sacred groves of Virudhunagar district arise from various human activities and natural climatic conditions. While natural factors are a contributing, the region is largely characterized by black loamy soil and usually low rainfall (50%), along with a significant high temperature range (39-42°C). These are the following reasons for the loss of biodiversity in Virudhunagar district.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the sacred groves in Virudhunagar district are vital cultural, ecological, and environmental assets. These groves, often associated with religious beliefs and rituals, play an essential role in conserving biodiversity, preserving traditional knowledge, and maintaining the region's natural heritage. The conservation of sacred groves contributes to local ecosystems by safeguarding rare and endemic species and preventing soil erosion. The

involvement of local communities in the upkeep of these groves reflects a deep connection between culture and nature. Efforts to protect and promote these sacred speices are essential for the region's environmental sustainability and cultural identity.

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