

The Role of Communication & Eco-Feminism in restoration of sacred groves in Kerala

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Abstract

Sacred groves are bio sanctuaries which had spiritual associations and therefore were protected especially by women in the household..Because these patches of land were left untouched it is known to house many endemic medicinal plants and herbs which are useful for the community. Lack of awareness and lack of proper understanding about the ecological services provided by the sacred groves has resulted in their destruction. In this paper, the researchers do a case study two existing 'kavu' in Trichur, Kerala. Without proper communication on the environmental values attached to sacred groves it is unlikely that these bio sanctuaries will stay intact. The main objective of the paper is to analyse the condition of 2 sacred groves . Secondly the researcher tries to understand what role environmental communication can play in the preservation of sacred grove. Finally it is important to understand that women have a major role to play in conservation of resources and what has been their role in the said 'kavu's which are part of the study.

.The study uses case study method and the methodology employed is Ethnography. The researcher has interacted with the locals and collected anecdotes and valuable information.. The cases are pertaining to existing sacred groves from Kerala, India. The tools applied are focus groups and key informant interviews . The study found that the need to communicate the traditional knowledge through suitable methods of communication without which the value of sacred groves is not known to the general public and it results in its destruction..

Keywords : Ecofeminism , Communication , Sacred groves , Case study , Kerala

Introduction:

Communication of the value of our natural resources in a language and medium that is simple and effective has become the need of the hour. While we learn about the natural resources and their importance to our lives through the text books, the common man does not relate to it. Atleast, he or she may not think that sustaining these ecological bio reserves has anything to do with his existence. Therefore there is usually no interest or active involvement from the general public in preserving these. The case is the same with the sacred groves. Sacred groves which have been existence for years together since early times are now under grave threat of development and absolute eradication. What is the reason for this? Human greed and ignorance of the value of the ecological services provided by

Sacred Groves make him look down upon them with disdain. The value of a sacred grove is certainly not more than any random material possession for most of us. It is only with communication and continuous education that this attitude can be changed. The ecological disasters we witness and the repercussions humanity has been facing is not new to any of us.

Through this case study, the researcher has tried to gauge the attitude of the public towards sacred groves, threats to their existence and plausible role of women in preserving them.

The objectives of this case study are

- ** To understand the role of environmental communication in preservation of Sacred Groves
- * To analyze the role of women in the management of Sacred Groves
- * To study the relevance of eco feminism in preservation of sacred groves

It has been observed that one of the many reasons for the decimation of sacred groves is the lack of understanding of their very purpose of existence. The collusion of religious authorities and the sacred groves owners to clear these spaces of wilderness and to install a temple in its place through appropriate religious sanctions is another reason. It may be necessary to impress upon the owners and the society the ecological services rendered by a sacred grove and also hand over some part of its management to women folk who may better understand and appreciate the need to nurture and care for it.

In this research paper, the researchers attempt to study the role of environmental communication and eco-feminism in restoring the importance of sacred groves in the Indian state of Kerala.

he research methodology is Ethnography which is a qualitative research methodology that employs interviews, observations, documentary data to produce a detailed and comprehensive account of a social phenomena. It focuses on large cultural groups of people who interact over a time period. The research method is Case Study of two Sacred Groves in the Central Kerala viz, KuzhiparrambilKavu and ThachanathuKavu. The tools employed is participatory method with field notes of narratives, interviews and historical documentation.

1.1. Literature Review

Here I present literature review of topics relevant to my research problem. The literature review has been divided into three parts : 1. Environmental Communication 2. Sacred Groves 3. Eco feminism

1.2.1 Environmental Communication

Environmental Communication according to Robert Cox has two major functions viz i) a pragmatic function in which we educate, alert, persuade and mobilize others and ii) a constructive function in which language and other symbols help shape our perception about reality and nature of environmental problems.(Cox Robert, Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere/Robert Cox- 2nd ed)Thus the language we use as in Environmental Communication becomes the symbolic medium to construct environmental problems and negotiate society's responses to them.(Cox Robert, Environmental Communication, pp-28-29) Cox also mentioned how the scholars in the field of environmental

communication have to consider themselves as members of a 'crisis discipline' formed to address imminent harm to human and natural environment. (Cox Robert, Environmental Communication and the public sphere, 2007) As per Chad Raphael, Cox did also mention why it is our ethical duty to identify and analyse 'the failures, distortions and /or corruption in human communication about environmental concerns'. (Chad Raphael(2019)

Numerous instances like the current disbelief of the vast scale of destruction to Amazon Rain forests, the pollution of lakes in Bangalore, the contamination of rivers, the razing of hills and hillocks in Kerala which has resulted in a flood recently are all examples of the collective ignorance and lethargy in understanding the disastrous impact of human actions on ecology which is at best fragile and prone to irreversible damage.

When the Dakota Access Pipeline was being laid, Standing Rock Sioux and other allies managed to mobilize thousands of Americans to demonstrate in protest, demanding replacement of oil with clean energy. The news of lead contamination in the black and low income Flint, Michigan led to an investigation which revealed similar threats to water quality across America and this gave rise to a demand for climate justice which went on to influence the formation of Paris Climate Accords. (Chad Raphael 2019)

Lack of proper funding for ecological sustainability causes is another issue that affects environmental communication based studies and dissemination of proper information in an appropriate medium. ((Laveesh Bhandari and Shreekant Gupta, October 15, 2019). This alone can help in conducting workshops and seminars for government, regulator, industry, academia in order to lead to behavioural change or motivating mass communication professionals to work on causes related to environment. There has been communication about environmental issues in American novels however it has not been enough to create any sort of awareness. For example the effect of the damages to the environment is mostly faced by those countries or nations which are least responsible for this. An example is the case of the low lying country of Bangladesh which may have to suffer 75% of the effects of climatic changes where as it has had least contribution to the current situation.(Mathew Schneider-Mayerson, 2019) When we talk about communication it is important to choose the right medium of communication to make an impact in the cause of environment. In order to bring about a lasting change in the attitude of the general public, the policy makers and the government, the way of communication is as important as what is communicated. It has been noted in the case of conservation of African resources the use of African indigenous languages is far more effective than the use of English.(F.A. Ruffin, L.J. Teffo and H.O. Kaya,2016) The desired change can only take place through provision of adequate knowledge and information so that the people are persuaded, through sound reasoning to change towards a certain direction. Thus, the method of packaging and dissemination of the environmental message is of great importance. Very often the language and presentation of important communication does not meet its purpose as it is not presented in the right format to the right audience, leaving them with a feeling of alienation rather than involvement. (Sadik ,2003)

Merly Shriver-Rice and Hunter Vaughan discuss how environmental media should be used as an all encompassing term to cover our concerns about the environment and to address it with alacrity. According to her the term Anthropocene which refers to the last 10,000 years of agrarian practices, the

two centuries of western industrialization and post war petro capitalism is not a term that requires debate but has to be accepted as a truth.(Meryl Shriver-Rice, Hunter Waughan, 2020)

The literature review of environmental communication throws open the fact that there is a need to reexamine the critical role of the mode and method of communication with respect to environment whether we call it environmental communication or environmental media is not of great importance but it is essential to understand that the message is not reaching the intended and therefore has to be reframed and restructured in simple coherent terms. With respect to the sacred groves in Kerala while there is some understanding of the ecological services provided by SGs the majority of the general public or even owners of sacred groves don't realize the vast implication of their actions with respect to the sacred groves.

1.2.2. Eco Feminism

Ecofeminism is a school of thought that sees a close connection between the mindless plunder of environment and the subjugation of women in the society. As a movement Eco feminism grew during 1980s and 1990s among women from the anti-nuclear, environmental, and lesbian-feminist movements.(Lois Ann Lorentzen, 2002) The concepts of eco feminism have been successful in influencing policy concerning gender (in)equality and environment for the past 20 years. Eco feminism has also influenced environmental debates in Europe. (Susan Buckingham, 2004) . The foremost warriors of eco feminism from India features Vandana Shiva in a prominent role. Shiva is known for her Earth Democracy concept which is a feminist effort to be inclusive of all species. The concept claims the intrinsic worth and equality of all species, the diversity in nature and culture and why it is important for us to balance our rights with our responsibilities to sustain earth and its resources.(Liane Loots, 2011). There has also not been enough consideration from the planning agencies to involve women in their activities. There is an inherent bias and a discrimination against women and their inherent biological processes which inhibit their active participation in conservation practices and policies . (Jayshree Vencatesan, 2008)The eco-feminism as a movement has faced a lot of back lash from anti-feminists in 1990s for their analyses of the connections between racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, speciesism and the environment. The struggle of ecofeminism to be a rightful subject of study is real and well documented in Eco feminism Revisited.(Greta Gaard,2011)

Different thoughts and ideas about Eco feminism does not take away its relevance in the role of women in the management of natural resources. In the case of sacred groves in Kerala, it is important to remember that the families in Kerala are known to follow the matriarchal system. Despite this the role of women in the management of sacred groves is negligible. Even in a rare case where a women is in supreme position to manage a sacred grove, her rights are found to be violated. This has happened as recently as in 2019 when a sacred grove owned by Mrs. Meena Menon in Paravur, Ernakulam District, Kerala State was used to forcibly erect 4 Kerala State Electricity Boards huge concrete pillars despite the opposition of the owner and the neighbors due to political highhandedness.

1.2.3 Sacred Groves

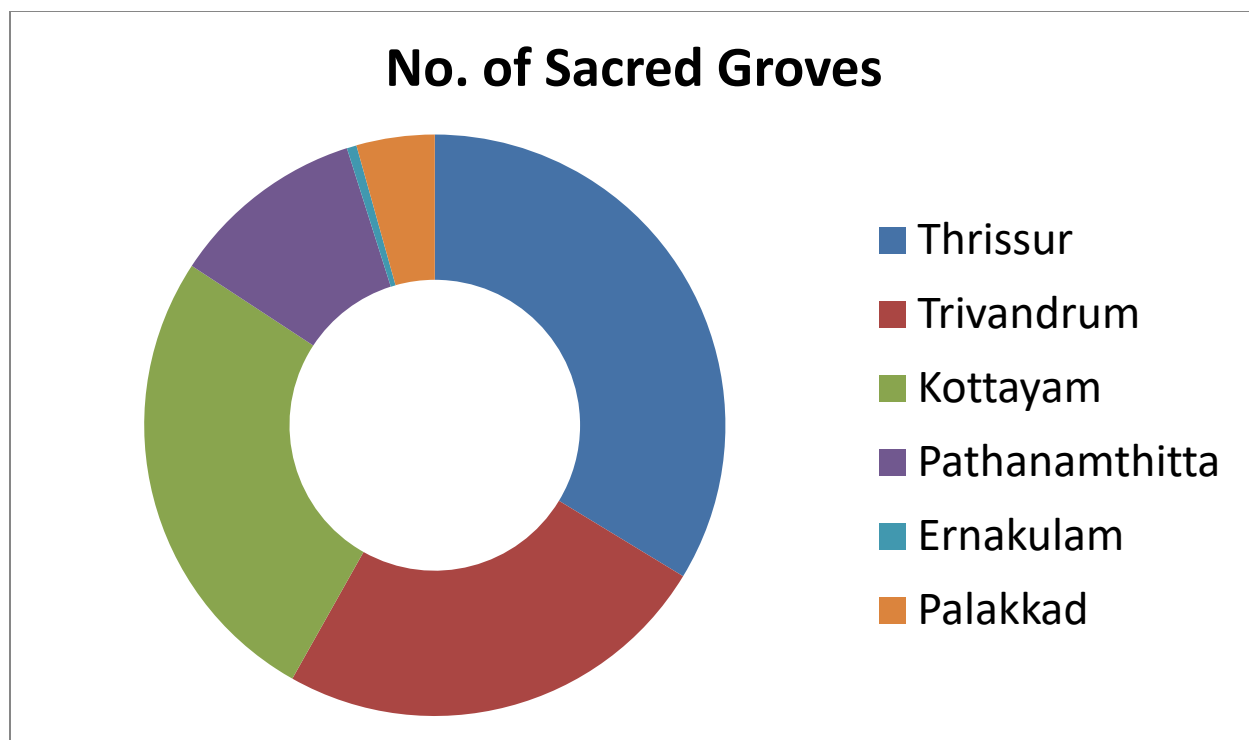
Sacred Groves are patches of land left fallow by the locals in lieu of religious and spiritual beliefs that emphasized that these patches of land belong to the local deity and should not be disturbed. This phenomenon is to be found across India. Kerala itself has many such sacred groves. These sacred groves are however under constant threat due to urbanization and land encroachment. The cultural ethos in

India gave importance to conservation of nature and natural resources and the communities that settle nearby take it upon themselves to preserve and nurture them as a part of their religious and spiritual responsibility. (Sushma Singh, Muddasair Youssouf, Zubair. A. Malik, Rainer W. Bussmann,) Sacred Groves are not unique to India, it is a wide spread global phenomenon and often associated with religion and culture and are instrumental in preserving biodiversity. (Mala Agarwal, 2016) The government has therefore instituted a grant for those who own sacred grove in order to preserve them. However there is no understanding of the ecological services provided by sacred groves and there decimation is a rampant across the country. Many of the sacred groves in Kerala are associated with female deities while some others have serpent worship, ayyapan, bhagavathy as deities installed. Devotees offer agricultural produce for the fulfillment of their wish. While there are many avenues for women to participate it is still peripheral when it comes to the management of sacred groves. (KFRI RP 597/2010). One way to ensure the protection of sacred groves is to ensure community participation so that biodiversity is conserved as sacred groves are merely forests but have a lot of spiritual and religious significance. (M.L. Khan, Ashalatha Dei, Khumbongmayum and R.S. Tripathi, 1987). Faith also has a major role in the protection of sacred groves as presented in one of videos titled, Sacred Groves of Kodagu. It is mentioned that due to the strong belief in the power of the deities locals are willing to do their best to protect or conserve the sacred groves of Kodagu. (Sacred Groves of Kodagu)

There is, however, a view that contradicts the role of faith in the conservation of sacred groves which says that people are willing to easily change their belief systems or accommodate changes in to justify the need to use sacred groves for their self advancement through commercialization. (Catrien Notermans, Albertina Nugteren and Suma Sunny,_) it has been observed by the researcher that the families that own sacred groves are willing to relocate the deities and make use of the land for construction with the support and collusion of so called religious authorities or priests who have a practice called 'matti parpikkal' which is a ritualistic re-accommodation of the deities in the sacred groves eventually leaving the land available for domestic or commercial purposes.

On the basis of the literature review it is concluded that there has not been a study in the area of the critical role of communication related to environment to disseminate information about the ecological services provided by sacred groves to communities. Lack of authentic information about the value of a sacred grove coupled with advancing of urbanization and need for land development has severely affected the existence of sacred groves. The central grant is not a great incentive to persuade the owners to leave the sacred grove intact as a bio sanctuary. The general concept of fallow land as being useless and a home for dangerous life forms also adversely affect the existence of sacred groves.

Kerala alone has around 1500 sacred groves as listed by the Kerala Forests & Wildlife Department. As seen below in the number of sacred groves in each district varies, this does not exclude that fact that there might be more which have not been enlisted here.



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1.2. Methodology: Ethnography

Research Method: Case Study, Baseline survey

Research Tools : Participatory Method: Field note of narratives , interviews and historical documentation.

The researcher has conducted a baseline survey of 2 sacred groves in Central Kerala, 2 in Thrissur. The method adopted by the researcher was based on oral history, interviews, focused discussions. The researcher has selected one kavu which is owned family trust and another that is owned by a management trust/committee in trichur district.

Four interviews were conducted in each of the kavus with the stake holders like the president of the committee, and three devotees.

In this paper the researcher presents her observations from the 2 kavus she visited.

1.3. Case Study 1:

KuzhiparambilKavu, Vadakkancheri, Trichur District

Founded in the kollavarsham(Malayalam year) 800-700, the temple is around 500 years old. The family belonged to Kadathanathu from where following an attack they had to flee in the night with the gods and goddesses. While thus fleeing the family stopped at the Manarakkadu temple called Maha Vishnu Kshethram. From the Vishnu temple they carried the serpent gods to the now existing Vadakkancheri temple, Trichur District, Kerala. Even to this day, the family follows the ritual in the first week or first Sunday of April every year in memory of their travel from Kadathanathu to Manarakkadu and then to Vadakkancheri. They also have Ayillam(Day as per the Malayalam calendar)events for serpent gods.

Formation of Trust

The Temple trust consists of 130 homes who are part of the family tree. The total area covered is 23 cents, which is roughly equivalent to a quarter of an acre. Though there were some plantation and trees earlier, following the advice of the spiritual leader, or thanthribased on Ashtamangalyaprashnam, (hindu astrological practice),the trees around were separated from temple. Later another new thantri or spiritual advisor suggested that the trees can be removed to put an end to the threat of serpents. Though the original concept of kavu is about preserving water tables and keeping the trees kept alive the owner agreed that the place has been tidied up with cement and laying of tiles. While in many kavus woman play a role in management at Kuzhiparambil there is no woman in the managing committee, neither is there a concept of Kavilamma as it is in the case of say, PambumekkattuMana which is one of the prominent Serpent worshipping,kavus in Central Kerala.

Deities

Suggesting the historical importance of the temple, the president mentioned the visit of Sreenarayana Guru, a revered sage of Kerala who suggested the worship of bhagavati, ganapathy and serpent gods at the temple.

The main utsavam or festival is **Pratishtadinam**, falling on Ayillam in the month of Kanni as per the Malayalam calendar. The month of April has important rituals like Sarpakalam, Bhoothakalam and BhagavathiPattu. While on regular days, the family members conduct poojas on special days a more trained practitioner is sought for.

Kuzhiparambil Dharma Dhaiva Trust

130 families and there are 5 members from each family are part of the trust called Kuzhiparambil Dharma Dhaiva Trust.RudramalaBhagavathi is the main pratishta(deity, in a less ferocious form). Regular give aways are payasam, (sweet porridge) and kalabham(sandal wood paste for application) after the pooja.

Observations:

The Kuzhiparambiltharavadu has successfully come up with a family tree and the temple trust is managed by family members. The Kavu has managed to unite the diverse members of the extended family who are eager to preserve the heritage. The use of social media and website has given the trust and its work a lot of visibility. However it is true that the trust or the Kavu has not sustained its ecological significance which is readily acknowledged by the members of the trust. There is no active

involvement of women in the management of the temple though they are active at the periphery. It does not now qualify to be called a sacred grove despite its name.

The transformation of the kavu into a temple highlights the value and need for environmental communication which educates and creates awareness among not just the owners of the kavu but also the villagers as to the ecological services rendered by a sacred grove, if preserved in its pristine form. The lack of understanding of this fact has led to the temple-fication of the sacred grove which though has brought certain benefits to the family has essentially taken away the character of the sacred grove. It is noted that women are not active in the management of the kavu, which if they had probably, they would have made a difference to the current state and probably had they too been aware and educated about the need to preserve sacred groves with its trees and foliage may have resisted the change to its current form. It is observed that while Eco feminism is rooted in the idea of women as nurturers taking charge of natural resources and playing a significant role in the sustenance of the same, it is not in reality happening as they themselves are not aware or interested or have not got an opportunity in the management of property, land or wealth. One can only speculate of these as the researcher could not find access to converse with the women folk in this case.

Case Study 2

ThachanathuKavu, Paralikkad, Trichur District

This temple complex is situated three kilometers away from Wadakancherry Railway station. There are three Prarthishtas BHAGAVATHI, SIVA and AYYAPPA. On the 1st Malayalam month of Kumbham (February, March) "Poornam" is celebrated ceremoniously. In the same month of Kumbham 'MahaSivarathri' is also celebrated auspiciously. During Sabiramala Pilgrimage season, devoted disciples of Lord Ayyappa throng here for their vratha and after worshipping the Ayyappa Deity here, they trek their way to Sabiramala. The Paliam Group Devaswom Trust has entrusted this Temple Complex for proper and smooth running with SwamyPurushothamTirtha, Rakshadhikari, Hindu NavothanaPrathisthan, VysaGiri, Wadakancherry. The Hindu Prathisthan is looking after the daily Poojas and proper maintenance of this temple Complex.

Origin

The main deity is a goddess Bhadra Kali and is a swayambu (self-born). Two deities in nearby temples vizMachaduThiruvanikkavu,famous for mamangam&Kutiankavukshethram are known as sisters of the Bhagavathi at ThachanathuKavu. The folk lore attributes the origin of kavu to 2000 years ago. The temple complex also houses an Ayyapan temple which is also swayambu according to Devaprashnam, (hindu astrological practice) and is equally important. Another story is that a farmer while reaping his field hit a stone which bled and then he was asked to install the deity in a temple. Another story gives credit to the Thachan or the Masons community who stayed here and therefore the name of the temple.

The padam or the rice field is called 'arikandam', this field has to be vacated for pooram or festival during Makaram30th ,In Kumbham(month according to Malayalam calendar)Ayyapan'sutsalvamor festival is to be conducted.

Formation of Trust

The temple committee consists of the locals and everybody participates in the festival. The trust comes under Hindu Navodhana Trust. Earlier it was under Paliamdevasom. Devasom refers to a temple governing body in earlier times. The concept of 'nana-durga' is a matter of pride for the locals.

Observations:

ThachanathuKavu despite the name has no ecological value, though the locals take pride in the temple pond which apparently is preserved with care so as to maintain the water table in the area. Women are not part of the temple management and there is no concept of Kavilamma here.

It is clearly observed that many of the 'kavu's have now transformed to temples and do not any more have trees or any kind of foliage. In most cases, the existence of trees and maintaining them as foliage that is undisturbed is not seen as an advantage to any one. In the case of Thachanathu kavu , the preservation of the temple pond is a matter of pride and the locals observe that maintaining the pond is a matter of pride and responsibility to the entire community and that has in turn ensured that the water table in the area is always maintained. As in the case of the previously mentioned kavu, there is no active involvement of women in the management of the activities of the kavu. What the kavu festivals and activities do is to bring together the community and bind them with a belief and faith that the activities in the temple are beneficial for the entire society and that they are all bound together with a responsibility to carry out the festivities and devotion to the deities in the temple.

Conclusion:

The paper argues that without proper emphasis on the benefits of preserving sacred groves in its authentic form there is no reason to expect that these bio spots or endemic islands of greenery in the state will survive the onslaught of land development and human greed. While many (erstwhile)sacred groves still retain the name 'Kavu' to them they have no trace of trees in their vicinity. By subverting and influencing and often innovating religious and spiritual practices, societies across the state are bent on putting the land that belongs to sacred grove to some 'useful purpose'. There lies the irony and the challenge faced by poor or incomplete communication. In the words of Robert Cox there was a time and it is still prevalent that the wilderness was equated to fallow or useless land. Reimagining the value of so-called fallow lands in terms of ecological services and communicating this to the owners and strictly enforcing the rule of law by way of rewarding or giving certain social privileges to those owners of sacred groves who try and maintain its authenticity will go a long way in retaining them.

Loop holes in communication leads to misinformation and will create a huge gap in the understanding of the relevance of sacred grove preservation to the new generation. A pro-active citizen state initiative backed up by scientific knowledge and communication that is clear, legible and engaging can be a game changer in this context.

The writers argue that simple and logical explanation of the ecological services of sacred groves is the need of the hour.

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