

SACRED GROVES OF TAMILNADU - A SURVEY



by
M. Amirthalingam

published by
C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre

**SACRED GROVES
OF TAMILNADU -
A SURVEY**

© 2005 C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre, Chennai
All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced without permission from

C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre

The C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation
1, Eldams Road, Alwarpet, Chennai - 600 018.

Phone: 91 44 24346526 / 24337023

Fax: 91 44 24320756

Email: cpreec@vsnl.com

Websites: www.cpreec.org www.ecoheritage.cpreec.org

ISBN 81-86901-04-3

Price: Rs. 250/-

This book has been printed on tree-free paper

FOREWORD

Sacred Groves represent an ancient Indian conservation tradition, protected by local people out of reverence and respect, fear and sentiment. They are the home of the local flora and fauna, a veritable gene pool and a mini biosphere reserve. Within these groves are locked ancient secrets of herbs and traditional medicine, primitive practices of sorcery and magic.

The Sacred Groves were the home of the Mother Goddess and her warriors, a spirit world to which people offered terracotta figures, particularly horses on which Ayyanar rode around the village at night.

Conservation, both at the macro or the micro levels, is essential for our survival. The take over of forests by the various State Governments has not been very successful, as it has alienated the people who have conserved them for years. On the other hand, when local communities have preserved their natural resources by setting a system of rules and taboos, it has very effectively preserved the same resources. The sacred groves are one such example.

India has a great tradition of conservation of natural resources. Reverence for rivers and lakes kept them clean, the sanctity attached to hills and mountains kept intact, the belief in the divinity of living organisms - people, animals and plants - preserved the forests and maintained the intricate web of life. Unfortunately, this reverence has been insulted and overshadowed by a system of development which is alien to Indian culture. If one single strand of the web is broken, the web collapses. As we pump sewage into the Ganga, deforest the hills for tea estates and destroy forests for paper industries, we are left with the problem of diminishing natural resources.

There has been a certain amount of debate as to whether the sacred groves should be brought under the Forest Department. This would be disastrous as it would alienate local people and present community conservation efforts would vanish. What is necessary is a National Policy which would recognise sacred groves as a mark of traditional Indian culture, respecting social and religious sentiments and as the repository of rural biodiversity, and ensure that their present status as community property will be inalienable for all time.

Mr.M. Amirthalingam has done yeoman's service in surveying the sacred groves of Tamilnadu. He personally visited all the groves which he has listed and took detailed floristic surveys of some of them. While there are undoubtedly many more, the present survey gives us a very good picture of the nature and characteristics of the kovilkaadugal of Tamilnadu. It requires the dedication and efforts of young people like Mr. Amirthalingam to study and record the wealth of the groves for future generations.

Dr. Nanditha Krishna

Hon. Director

C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre

Chennai

About this book

The sacred groves or kovilkadugal are an inherent feature of the ecological heritage and tradition of the southern state of Tamilnadu in India. These groves are the last remnants of the forests that once thrived in these areas. In the shade of the trees there is to be found a shrine, generally of the mother goddess, which is worshipped by the local community. In order to preserve both the environment and sanctity of the grove, several intriguing taboos and customs laid down way back in the past are still in existence.

C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre, in its effort to raise awareness about the need to conserve such a significant ecological heritage, conducted an extensive survey of the sacred groves of Tamilnadu. Apart from reporting the general characteristics of the sacred groves, the author has also surveyed the vegetation, size and deities of over 400 groves and made a detailed floristic study of six groves that stood out in the uniqueness of their vegetation, deity and associated practices.

For more information, please visit www.ecoheritage.cpreec.org which contains information on

- Sacred Trees of India
- Sacred Rivers of India
- Sacred Groves of India
- Sacred Animals of India
- Sacred Gardens of India
- Sacred Precincts of India
- Sacred Mountains of India
- Sacred Water bodies of India



Other books in this series:

- Ecological Traditions of Tamilnadu
- Ecological Traditions of Karnataka
- Ecological Traditions of Andhra Pradesh
- Sacred Trees of Tamilnadu
- Sacred Tanks of South India
- Temple Tanks of Chennai