

Sacred Groves of Tamilnadu - Some Representative Examples

(Report Submitted to the SIDA Review Mission, 1995)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) for their generous support, with out which it would not have been possible to carry out this important project work on the conservation of Sacred groves as part of the community Biodiversity conservation Programme.

INTRODUCTION

Sacred groves, are set aside forests, varying in size from a few trees to many hectares of forest lands protected on religious and spiritual grounds. These undisturbed forest pockets are mostly dedicated to the local deities and have many do's and don'ts attached to them depending on the local beliefs. All components of the vegetation like herbs, shrubs, climbers and lofty trees are found in these sacred forests. These sacred groves are found in a wide variety of habitats ranging from the hill tops to coastal plains.

More than being a unique cultural and biological heritage, the conservation of sacred groves has valuable scientific importance. Climax vegetation in sacred groves is always very rich in plant diversity. They serve as indicators of the native vegetation of that region, which has undergone many changes over the years. These *sanctum sanctoriums* of ex-situ conservation of ecological, economic, and cultural key species serve the vital function of preserving natural ecosystems and biodiversity.

Our study on sacred groves is confined to Tamilnadu to start with, where an attempt has been made to document the sacred groves and to analyse the rationale behind conserving the plant genetic resources and the selection of species. Essentially, this study is initiated as part of the ongoing effort to implement the concept of Farmers' Rights wherein it is necessary to develop procedures for recognising and rewarding the intellectual property contributions of tribal and rural women in the conservation and enhancement of genetic diversity. To this effect a Resource Centre for Farmers' Rights has been established MSSRF.

The multimedia database developed on sacred groves as a module of the Farmers' Rights Information Service (FRIS) maintains detailed information on the history of the groves, significance of the vegetative composition, animals found in the grove, the scientific importance of the sacred groves, and the rationale behind the selection of species. A representative sample of the 10 sacred groves of the database on "Sacred Groves In Conservation of Plant Genetic Resources" is provided in this report.

Apart from documenting the details, rehabilitation work on the sacred groves is also underway with the help of local NGOs and communities. A community oriented effort is initiated at Soundaraja Perumal Temple sacred grove, of Dindugal district with the assistance of Krishivigyan Kendra of the Gandhigram, Rural University and in St. Thomas Mount of Chengalpattu district with the help of WWF, Madras.

Components of the Multimedia Database on 'Sacred Groves in Conservation of PGR'

PART I

- a. Location
- b. Geographic Information
- c. Details of the place and people

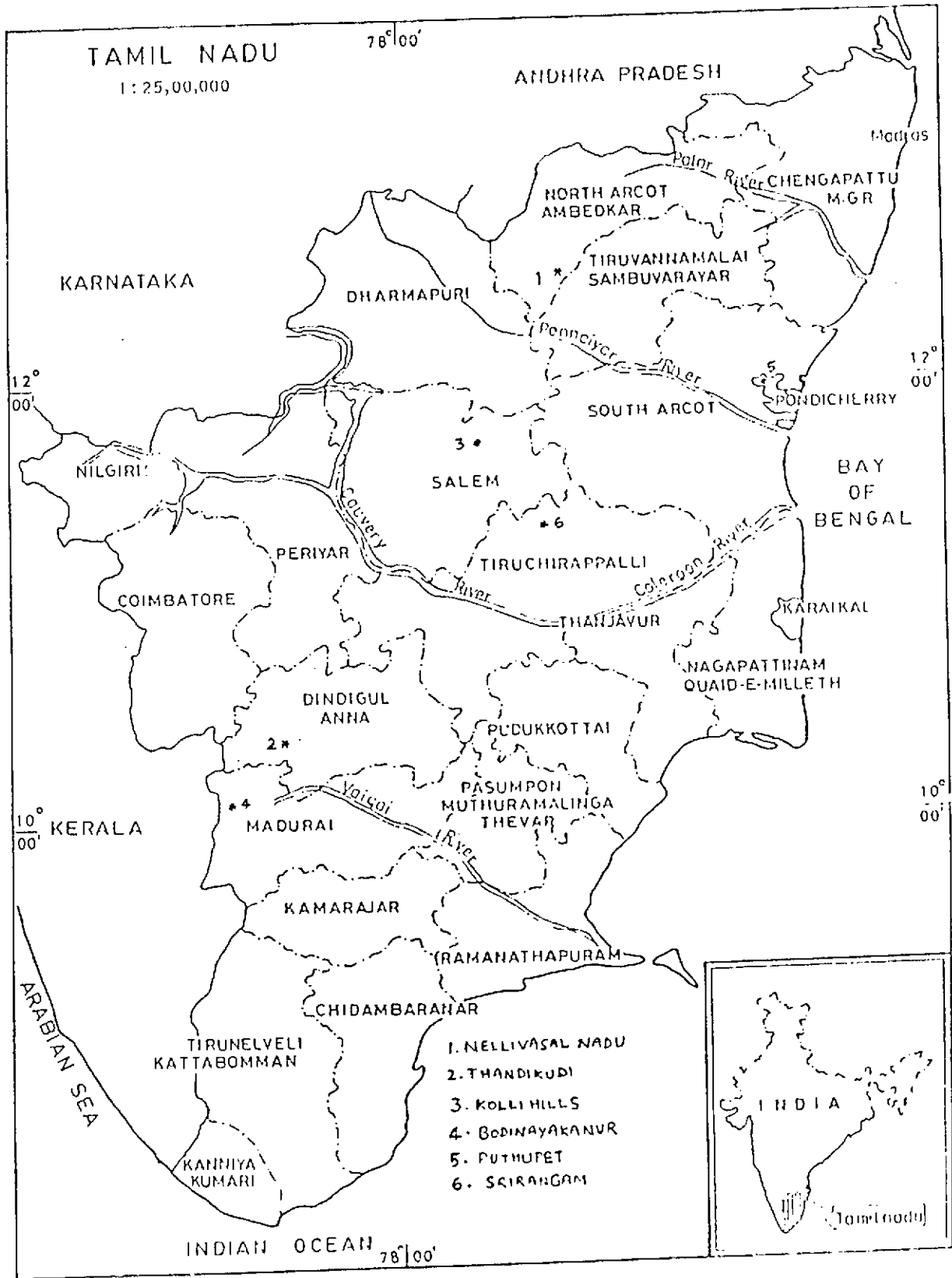
PART II

- a. History of the Sacred Grove
- b. Cultural & Anthropological significance
- c. Beliefs associated with the deity and the Grove

PART III

- a. Vegetative composition
- b. Presence of rare and endangered species
- c. Key stone species and the rationale behind the selection of species

The Study Area



List of Sacred Groves

1. Vadamalainachi Sacred grove of Bodinayakanur, Madurai Distict
2. Sanjeevirayan Hill of Nellivasalnadu, North Arcot Ambedkar District
3. Kollipavai Sacred grove of KolliHills, Salem District
4. Kariammal Sacred grove of Thandikkudi, Dindugal District

VADAMALAINACHI SACRED GROVE

General information

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Name of the Habitation | Kurangani |
| Nearest Habitation | Kottakudi |
| Taluk | Uthamapalayam |
| District | Madurai |
| Distance from habitation | 5 kms from nearest habitation |
| Distance from Dist. HQ | 107 kms from district headquarters |
| Elevation | 200 mts above sea level |
| No of Houses | 150 |
| Terrain | Valley slope |
| Major Agricultural crops | Rice, Sugarcane, Silk-cotton, maize and arecanut |
| Domesticated Animals | Cows, goats, hens, pigs and dogs |

Land Description

| | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Land Use | Agriculture |
| Vegetative Cover | Thin vegetative cover |
| Nature of soil | Thin sandy Soil |
| Water Resource | Seasonal stream |
| Name of the grove | Vadamalainachi grove |
| Ownership | Community ownership |
| Principal Deity | Vadamalainachi |

History of the Temple

This small sacred grove encompassing an area of one acre of common land is found at the outskirts, at a distance of 2 kms from the village Kottakudi. This village is inhabited by the Mandradiar community. This grove is dedicated to the local deity Vadamalainachi. The idol of the goddess, vadamalainachi is found at a slightly elevated point of the land is surrounded by a patch of Vegetation. The origin of the temple is not clearly known and dates back to centuries. According to some of the elders of the village this grove was established during the period of Tippusultan, by the people who migrated from Mysore.

Taboos

Women are not allowed to enter the grove, however they are permitted to see the deity from a distance. Felling of trees, collection of dead wood and leaf litter is strictly prohibited. The pulayar tribal community, who work as farm labourers, living in the village are not allowed to enter the temple.

Nature of Punishments

It is believed that those who go against the norms of the temple will be punished by the goddess. Punishments are in the form of sickness to individual offenders, and to their livestock.

Attribution of Sacred qualities

The whole of area surrounding the temple is considered to be sacred. There is a small perennial stream flowing nearby the grove. The water from the stream is considered to be holy and believed to cure all diseases.

Worship Presider

The Village preist

Nature of sacrifice

Animal sacrifice is in practice. Generally goat and hen are sacrificed during the festival occasions.

Community Worshipping the Deity

All the people belonging to the manradiar community only worship this deity. The Pulayar community who also live in the same village are not permitted to enter this grove or worship this deity.

Tendency of Violation

Generally people of the village strictly adhere to the norms of the sacred grove.

Vegetative composition

| LOCAL NAME | BOTANICAL NAME |
|------------|----------------|
|------------|----------------|

| | |
|----------------|--------------------|
| Aathi maram | Bahinia racemosa |
| Kattu Elanthai | Zizipus mauritiana |
| Vandalli | Gyrocarpus indica |
| Karunthuvarai | Silo machaea |
| Engu mullu | Mimosa indica |
| Usillai maram | Albizia amara |

Animals found Bats, monkeys, snakes

Key Species

The dominant species of this area is **Usilai** (*Albizia amara*). According to one of the elders of the village this area is severely affected by wind during the monsoon and these Usilai trees act as barricades and provide the shelter belt. Hence these trees are preserved with much care and devotion.

Associated organisations

Forest department

Key Informants

Mr. Suburaj, Village Head
Mr. Sundaramurthy
Mr. Gunasekaran



View of the Vadamalainachi Sacred grove at Kurangani, Madurai District

SANJEEVIRAYAN SACRED GROVE

General Information

| | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Name of the Habitation | Nellivasal Nadu |
| Nearest Habitation | Sembarai |
| Taluk | Singarapet |
| District | North-Arcot Ambedkar Dist. |
| Distance from DistrictHQ | 100Kms |
| Elevation | 900 m above Sealevel |
| Terrain | Hill Top Ridge |
| No of Households | 300 |
| Major Agricultural Crops | Millet, Paddy, Pulses and Maize |
| Domesticated Animals | Cow, Dog, Ox, and Goats |

Land Description

| | |
|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Land Use | Housing and Agriculture |
| Vegetation Cover | Natural Forest |
| Nature of Soil | Rocky |
| Water Source | Seasonal |
| Name of the Grove | Sanjeevarayan Hills |
| Ownership | Common Land |
| Principal Deity | Lord Hanuman |
| Size of the Grove | 700 mts radius |

History of the Temple and Grove

It is understood from the elders of the village and the temple priest that Lord Hanuman, one of the Key characters of the Indian epic Ramayana, on his way to Lanka carrying the Sanjeevirayan mountain rested here on top of this hill. Lord Hanuman is believed to have rested at the place where the present temple is located. Prayers are offered to Lord Hanuman's foot steps represented by a block of stone.

According to some of the elders, some of the blocks of Sanjeevirayan Mountains (treasure house of medicinal plants and herbs) were dropped here in this hill top. And hence, this area is believed to be rich in medicinal plants. The local people celebrate two festivals very elaborately with devotion and respect. The first festival is celebrated prior to the sowing season, where the seeds for sowing is offered to the Lord in order to have a good yield. The second festival is celebrated soon after the harvest. The first grains of the harvest are offered to the God before domestic use. The whole community takes part in these two important religious ceremonies.

Taboos

Foot wears to be removed at the entrance of the path leading to the sacred grove. Tree felling is strictly prohibited. Harming the animals found in the grove is considered to be a sin. women are not supposed to live under the roof made out of the wood fetched from this grove.

Nature of Punishments

It is generally beleived that God punishes the offenders by bringing illness to them, inflicting failure of agricultural crops, and disease to the livestock. Generally a fine is imposed by the preist, and at times the offenders are forced to live outside the village.

Worship Presider

Preist

Attribution of Sacred Qualities

Whole grove is considered sacred.

Offerings made to the Deity

Flowers, fruits, Grains, Cooked Food, and Cash

Communities Worshipping the Deity of the grove

This temple is common to 7 villages found in the surroundings. All the seven villages around are inhabited by Malayali tribes.

Change in worship pattern

There is no change in the rituals and offerings for many centuries as per the priest of the temple.

Material Benefits

Leaf litter accumulation, dead wood and occassionaly tree felling is reported strictly for temple purposes and ceremonious use.

Tendency of Violation of Taboos

All the regulations are strictly in force till today. Natural forest being preserved over the years with great care and respect.

Vegetative Composition of the Grove

| BOTANICAL NAME | LOCAL NAME |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Memecylon edule</i> | Alla |
| <i>Tarenna asiatica</i> | Taranna |
| <i>Pavetta Indica</i> | Pavatta |
| <i>Cassia fistula</i> | Konnai |
| <i>Solanum torvum</i> | Sundai |
| <i>Carissa carandas</i> | Kala |
| <i>Terminallia bellerica</i> | Thanni |
| <i>Tamarindus indica</i> | Puliyam |
| <i>Gardenia resinifera</i> | Perumkambi |
| <i>Butea monosperma</i> | Morasum |
| <i>Artocarpus interfolius</i> | Palla |
| <i>Ficus bengalensis</i> | Aalam |
| <i>Canthium parviflorum</i> | Kara |
| <i>Toddalia asiatica</i> | Molavaranda |
| <i>Strychnos nux-vomica</i> | Yetti |
| <i>Holoptelea integrifolia</i> | Aavili |
| <i>Anogeissus latifolia</i> | Nama |
| <i>Alangium salvifolium</i> | Avunji |
| <i>Achyranthus aspera</i> | Naaviri |
| <i>Datura innoxia</i> | Voomatha |
| <i>Scheichera oleosa</i> | Pugulu |
| <i>Wedelia chensis</i> | Manja Karsilangani |

Animals found

Snakes, Monkeys, and wild Boars, Mongoose.

Other relevant information

Largest Banyan tree which is 150 years old is found in this grove
Number of trees approximately ranges to 250

Associated Organisations

Forest department.

Key Informants

Mr. Thukkan of Nellivasalnadu
Mr. Veddi of Nellivasalnadu



Sacred Grove Dedicated to Lord Hannuman at Nellivasal Nadu, North Arcot district



View of the Sacred grove at Sanjivirayan Hills of Nellivasal Nadu

KOLLIPAVAI SACRED GROVE

General Information

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Name of the Habitation | Oorpuram colony |
| Nearest Habitation | Thinnanur |
| Taluk | Kollihills taluk |
| District | Salem |
| Distance from District HQ | 70 kms from district headquarters |
| Elevation | 500 meters above sealevel raise |
| No of Houses | 35 houses |
| Terrain | Undulating |
| Major Agricultural Crops | Maize, Minor Millets, Pulses and vegetables. |
| Domesticated Animals | Cow, Buffalo, Dog, goat and sheep |

Land Description

| | |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| Land Use | Housing, Agriculture |
| Vegetation Cover | Disturbed Forest |
| Nature of the Soil | Redsoil |
| Water Source | Perinnial |
| Name of the Grove | Kollipavai Solai |
| Ownership | Private |
| Principal Deity | Perumal |
| Size of the Grove | 5 acres |

History of the Temple and the Grove

The local deity is perumal, who is beleived to reside in the anthill which is the *sanctom-sanctorium* of the people. The exact periodof existence of this temple is not known. it is understood that there was some other deity adjacent to this temple, many centuries ago, to whom human sacrifices were made. The human blood is beleived to be mixed with the cooked rice and distributed among the devotees. One of the villagers share of the sacred food is reported to have turned in to snakes. Next day the temple preist was possessed by the God and told the villagers that the practice of human sacrifice has to come to an end, and only cooked rice with a sauce without any spices has to be offered to Him. Only salt is added to the sauce and rice. Also from that day the other deity to whom human sacrifices were made was placed in the backyard and no rituals performed to this deity till date. The deity Perumal has gained importance and a seperate temple with a thatched roof is built for Him, who is beleived to exist there in the termite mound. The roof of the temple is made of a Sacred grove. special grass, and it is changed once in two years. There are around 250 trees found in this grove. and most of them are aged more than a few hundred years.

Taboos

Strict observance of religious taboos noted. No tree is felled. Not even the dead woods are cleared. Females are not allowed to enter the sanctom. Sanctorium of the temple.

Nature of Punishments

People violating the taboos of the temple are beleived to suffer from all ailments.No punishment imposed by humans.

Worship Presider

Temple Preist and the owner of the land.

Communities Worshipping

All the people living in the village worship this deity.

Material Benefits

Ther is no evidence of felling trees or other kind of material benefits derived out of this grove.

Tendency of Violation of Taboos

A stray incidence of an attempt made by a wood dealer of Nammakkal, 25 years back, who went ahead to fell a very old tree, inspite of all the warnings. It is understood that a snake appeared and stopped.

Vegetative Composition of the Grove

| BOTANICAL NAME | LOCAL NAME |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>Ficus racemosa</i> | Athi |
| <i>Ficus bengalensis</i> | Aalam |
| <i>Artocarpus interifolia</i> | Palla |
| <i>Magnifera indica</i> | Mamaram |
| <i>Azadirachta indica</i> | Vembu |
| <i>Pongamia glabara</i> | Pungam |
| <i>Michelia champaka</i> | Shenbagam |
| <i>Alseodaphne seane</i> | Manja Moola |
| <i>Musa Paradisica</i> | Vazhai |
| <i>Memecylon sp.</i> | Vallichai |
| <i>Persia macrantha</i> | Moolamaram |
| <i>Myristica dactyloides</i> | Jathikai |
| <i>Jasminum sp.</i> | Kattumalli |
| <i>Melia dubia</i> | Devakanni |

Animals Found Monkeys, Snakes, squirrels

Other Relevant Information

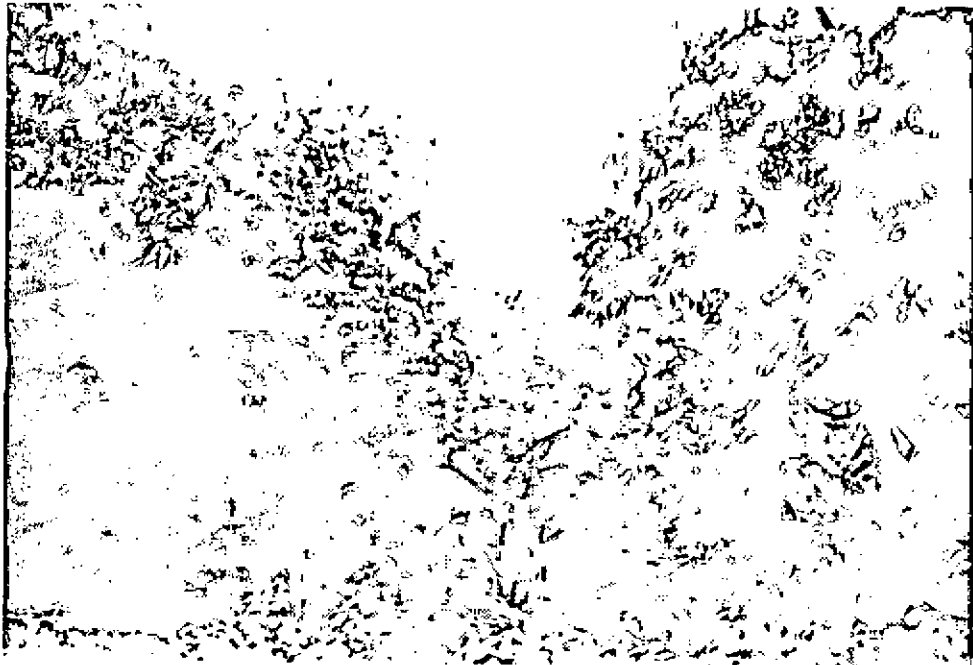
This grove houses many species which are native to this area. The canopy of the tree cover is quite conducive for Cardomom cultivation.

Key Informant

Mr. Pannerselvam



View of the Kollipavai Sacred grove at Kolli Hills, Salem District



Sacred Grove and its Surroundings

Kariammal Sacred Grove

General Information

| | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Name of the Habitation | Thandikudi |
| Nearest Habitation | Pannaikadu |
| Taluk | Kodaikannal |
| District | Dindugal-Anna Dist |
| Distance from Dist HQ | 70 kms |
| Elevation | 900 meters above sea level |
| No of Houses | 400 |
| Terrain | Hill top Plateau |
| Major Agricultural Crops | Coffee, Vegetables, and Cordamom |
| Domesticated Animals | Cow, Horse, Dog, and Goats |

Land Description

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Land Use | Horticulture and Housing |
| Vegetative Cover | Thick Canopy vegetation |
| Nature of Soil | Thin soil in some places and rocky in some areas. |
| Ownership | Community Owned |
| Water Resource | Seasonal stream |
| Principal Deity | Kariammal |

History of the Temple/Grove

The local deity of this sacred grove is Kariammal. Kariammal is believed to be the incarnation of Vishnu. This God is believed to be fond of small children. Mostly barren women worship this deity. There is a story that the deity punished a couple for not fulfilling His wish. The deity, once wanted the child of the couple to be left in His temple overnight, which was heard by all the devotees through a mysterious voice. But the couple refused to this and as a consequence they found their child in pieces with flesh and blood. Even today there is a 'Samadhi' (tomb) found near the temple where the child is believed to be buried. People offer prayers to this samadhi as well. All the animal sacrifices are offered only to this samadhi even today.

Taboos

Felling of trees within the grove is strictly prohibited. Women are permitted to enter the temple only on fridays. Menstruating women are not allowed inside the vicinity of the grove. No harm in any form to the animals found in the grove is permitted.

Nature of Punishments

Strong belief is prevailing that the deity will bring bad omen to the people who override the regulations. If the menstruating women enter the grove they will be taken to task by the bees.

Worship Presider

Temple preist and the pattakkarar (King of the tribal Communities)

Offeringsmade to the Deity

There is a seperate altar found near the entrance of the grove where animal sacrifices are made even today during festival occassions.

Communities Worshipping the Deity

People from four villages surrounding this area worship this deity. Palliyars, Pullayars, Pillai communities

Material Benefits

There is obvious destruction of the species in the periphery of the sacred grove though the vegetation surrounding the temple remains intact. Ocasionaly the dead wood and leaf litters are removed. The other income generated through the produces of the trees is spent for temple purposes.

Tendency of Violation

The regulations are generally observed with due regards and respect. People who have gone against the grove's norms is reported to have had some bitter experiences. But no specific incidence is sited.

Vegetative Composition

| BOTANICAL NAME | LOCAL NAME |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| Santalum album | Santhanamaram |
| Artocarpus interifolius | Palla |
| Macaranga peltata | Vattakani |
| Syzygium sp. | Kattulavangai |
| Canthium dicocum | Sulundu |
| Terminalia chebula | Kadukkai |
| Caryota urens | Kunthal pannai |
| Phyllanthus emblicus | Nelli |
| Michelia champaka | Shenbagam |
| Gmelina arborea | Kummulu |
| Grewia telifolia | Thalainar |
| Clausena heptapayla | Potti |
| Ficus recamosa | Athi |
| Anogeissus latifolia | Vekali |
| Syzygium cumini | Naval |
| Canarium strictum | Kunglium |
| Memeceylon edule | Kayam |

Animals Found

Squirells, Monkeys, reptiles, Wild Boar

Key Species & Other Relevant Information

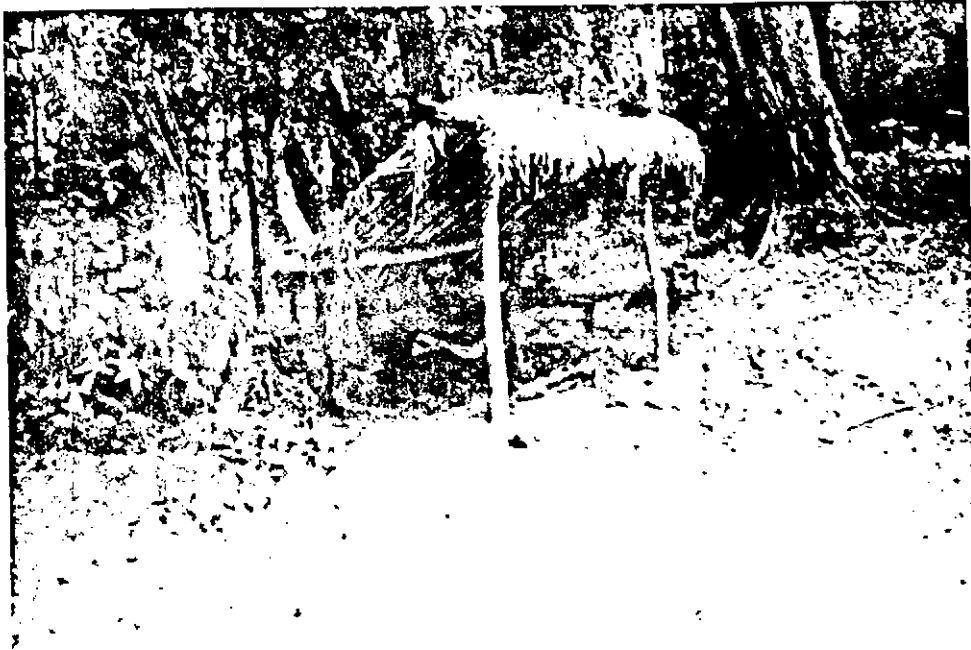
The species found in this grove serve as an indicator of the native vegetation of this area. This grove remains intact eventhough the surrounding areas have been cleared for housing and horticultural purposes. Key species is Vekali and its leaves are reported to retain the moisture content of the surrounding area.

Associated Organisations

Forest Department, Cordomom Research Institute

Key Informants

Mr. Gandhi
Mr. Ganesan



View of the Kariammal Sacred Grove at Thandikudi, Dindugal Anna District



Temple Associated with the Sacred Grove

FUTURE PLAN OF WORK

- To extend the documentation work on sacred groves more intensively covering all the districts of Tamil Nadu.
- To rehabilitate atleast one sacred grove in each district of Tamil Nadu in collaboration with the local NGOs and the native community.

Indicative Budget for Sacred Grove Conservation Programme - (1996 - 2000)

| Work Description | Per Year | For 4 Years |
|--|---------------------|--------------------|
| | (In Rupees) | |
| 1. Documentation Work | | |
| Field Trips & Field Accessories | 50,000 | 2,00,000 |
| 2. Restoration Work | | |
| Includes cost of saplings, stipends for the Biodiversity Conservation Corps | 50,000 | 2,00,000 |
| 3. Local NGOs & Community meetings, Training and Awareness Programmes | 25,000 | 1,00,000 |
| 4. Salary of Project Leader & Incidental Expenses | 1,00,000 | 4,00,000 |
| | <hr/> | <hr/> |
| Total | 2,25,000 | 9,00,000 |
| | <hr/> | <hr/> |

(Rupees Nine Lakhs)

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