Management practices and stakeholder interactions along with sacred groves in Kerala

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Abstract: Various developmental practices and changes in the social fabric threaten the existence of the local forest ecosystems such as sacred groves. A sacred grove, a forest common, traditionally has religious importance and unique management systems in place due to its cultural value. Sacred groves were in the ownership of a family or a community and had multiple stakeholders such as deity, devotees, communities, trusts. However rapid urbanization, increasing demographic demands negatively impact the sacred groves. With increasing stress on commercialization, the role of various stakeholders is changing esp the role of women in the management of Sacred groves has dwindled. The breakdown of ‘ancient joint family systems’ like ‘tharavadu’ has adversely affected the number of sacred groves in the state. The existence of 15, 000 sacred groves in the erstwhile state of Travancore was recorded in 1927 whereas current estimates account for not beyond 2000 sacred groves. As the number of stakeholders reduced, the community involvement in the management of sacred groves has also diminished over time. This paper studies the differential management dynamics in the sacred groves of Kerala, India using case studies of two sacred groves. It analyses how different stakeholders interact with each other using ethnographic methods. The paper argues that management practices of sacred groves should be more inclusive and should promote inter-generational dialogue.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Ethnography, Inter-generational dialogue, Sacred groves, Stakeholder analysis

1. Introduction
Sacred groves [Ormsby and Bhagwat. 2010], [Gadgil and Vartak. 1976], [Chandrakar, et al. 2014] are patches of land left fallow by the communities as they are associated with certain spiritual beliefs. The land is left untouched and the resources of the land are not utilized by the community making it a haven for many endemic species of flora and fauna [4, 8, 12]. India is said to have had around 50,000 sacred groves and the state of Kerala itself has around 2000 sacred groves [9]. The sacred groves in India are known by different names and the deities and the ritualistic practices different sacred grove differs based on location, social customs, and deities installed, etc [8]. The styles of management of sacred groves based on their owners are either with the Devasom board, the government, public or
private trust. A private trust is usually run by the family with community participation. [1,2] Due to their spiritual and religious associations, management practices are still varied and fluid. There is no singular way to ensure their protection. Practices like ‘ozhippikkal’ to relocate the deity has become a way of institutionalizing the usurping of land allotted to sacred groves by ancestors for personal needs. [7, 9] This paper looks into the perspectives of stakeholders concerning the sacred groves and their ecological services.

2. Materials and Methods
This case study looks at two sacred groves in the Thrissur district of Kerala which now show minimal greenery due to the transformations sanctioned by ‘thantri’ or the priest. KuzhiparambilKavu is managed by a family trust called, ‘Dharma Dhaiva Trust’, and the ThachanathuKavu is managed by a local committee temple trust. Both the ‘kavu’s or sacred groves have a very ancient past dating back to several hundred years. The KuzhiparambilKavu is situated in Wadakkanchery and ThachanathuKavu is situated in Parlikkad, Thrissur district of Kerala. The case study used narrative methods of collecting data by using semi-structured and open-ended questions which probed the attitudes of the stakeholders towards sacred groves, the history, the practices followed, etc. The researcher used the snowball technique to interview 5 individuals from each sacred grove to gather information about the role of women in kavu, rituals and practices followed, the deities installed, awareness of environmental causes, history of the kavu, and current practices. The interviewees had different roles like that of trust member, devotee, committee president, secretary, resident, etc. The interviewees were very cooperative and supportive of the research process and expressed interest in sharing knowledge about the respective ‘kavu’ or sacred grove. However, it is important to note that the current management practices do not recognize the ecosystem services rendered by sacred groves. The etymological interpretation of the Malayalam word ‘kavu’, meaning sacred grove refers to the very purpose of a sacred grove, i.e ‘that which needs to be protected’, but the name belies the reality.

3. Results and Discussions
3.1. Case Study 1: KuzhiparambilKavu, Wadakkanchery, Thrissur District, Kerala
3.1.1. History
The origin of the said kavu or sacred grove dates back to 400 years. The story goes that the ‘tharavadu’ or the ‘original joint family’ used to reside in Kadathanadu, presently part of Vadakara near Calicut District in Malabar coastal area. Due to some issues, the family had to flee the place and they left with their gods and goddesses and stopped at Maha Vishnu temple in Mannarkadu, Palakkad District. From there they brought serpent gods and then came to Vadakkanchery where they settled down. In the Malayalam month of Ayillam falling roughly in April of the English calendar, the ‘kavu’ even today conducts various rituals for the serpent gods. According to the legend, the temple and the family were visited by the great social reformer and teacher, Shri Narayana Guru who advised the family to worship Bhagavathy [the goddess], Ganapathy [Vignesh], and serpent gods. Shri Narayana Guru is known as one of the leading reformist saints of Kerala who advocated the eradication of the caste system.

3.2.2. Practices
The chief festivals marked in the temple calendar include ‘utsavam’, meaning ‘fair’ or annual festival, ‘prathishtadinam’, marking the ‘consecration of the deity in the temple on the day of ‘Ayilam’ in ‘Kanni’ month as per Malayalam calendar, falling between mid-September to mid-October. ‘Sarpakalam’ or ritualistic drawing to worship serpent gods, ‘Bhoothakalam’ for the five elements, and finally ‘Bhagavathypattu’ or ‘Kalamezhuthupattu’ in honor of the presiding goddess in the temple are also conducted on these occasions. ‘Kalam’ is nothing but a ritualistic powder art that is drawn during the festival in honor of the gods accompanied by the singing of hymns in a very traditional
setup. The daily ‘pooja’ or the ‘practice of prayer’ is conducted by the family member and on special occasions a ‘thantri’ or ‘qualified priest’ who is called to the temple. The temple area is around 23 cents part of which area has been donated by members of the family. The participation of the youth is visible in the activities of the temple as a dedicated website is maintained detailing the family tree as well as the updates of all the activities at the temple. The family trust that runs the temple takes pride in the fact that reviving the sacred grove, now a ‘temple’ has brought the family together and keeps them united. 130 members from different families who form part of the ancient ‘tharavadu’ manage the temple trust called, ‘Dharma Daiva Trust’. The management of the trust is by members of the family on mutual agreement. Women do not hold any prominent post in the trust but usually help out in the activities at the temple which they participate enthusiastically.

The use of new media is an interesting aspect of the ‘kavu’ to bring together the family and connect the people to the rituals and practices of the trust and the temple. The authorities mentioned how the ‘kavu’ or sacred grove which had ample vegetation was cleared after instructions or suggestions from the ‘thantri’ who advised to keep the area clean to remove ‘serpen’ which is ironic because the sacred grove/kavu itself was dedicated to ‘worship of serpents’.

3.1.3 Observations
The Kuzhiparambilkavu which is well managed by the Dharma Dhaiva Trust has achieved the goals of family bonding, cultural propagation but has not met with the very purpose of the ‘kavu’ or the sacred grove which is to contribute to the ecological equilibrium.[12] While there is awareness about the need to preserve the greenery and provide a sanctuary to the flora and fauna, modernization of the ‘kavu’ or the sacred grove has not left any room for this.

3.2. Case Study 2: Thachanathu Kavu, Parlikadu, Wadakkanchery, Thrissur District, Kerala

3.2.1 History
Thachanathu Kavu is situated three kilometers away from Wadakancherry Railway station. Paliam Group Devasom Trust which managed the temple earlier has entrusted this Temple Complex for proper and smooth running with Swamy Purushotham Tirtha, Rakshadhikari, Hindu Navothana Prathisthan, Vysa Giri, Wadakancherry. ‘Paliam’ refers to a royal family who earlier patronized many temples. ‘Devasom’ means a board that manages temples in Kerala. The temple traces its history to several hundred years and has an adjacent pond that is well maintained by the trust.

3.2.2. Practices
There are three presiding deities or ‘pratishtas’ here viz Bhagavathi, or ‘goddess’ Siva and Ayappa. On the 1st Malayalam month of Kumbham, falling in the English calendar between February and March, “Poornam” or the annual temple festival, is celebrated ceremoniously. In the same month of Kumbham ‘Maha Sivarathri’, dedicated to Lord Shiva is celebrated auspiciously. During ‘Sabirama’ Pilgrimage season, devoted disciples of Lord Ayyappa throng here for their ‘vratha’ or pledge.[‘Sabarimala’ is a very famous temple dedicated to Lord Ayappa with devotees from across the country who visit the two months’ annual pilgrimage season between December and January]. The devotees visit Thachanathukavu and pay obeisance to Lord Ayappa before proceeding to Sabirama according to the local history. The Hindu Prathisthan is looking after the daily Poojas and proper maintenance of this temple Complex. Spread on 0.04047 hectares, the temple complex has no presence of greenery except for an ancient tree. A temple pond is maintained by the temple trust and this maintenance of the temple pond is understood to contribute to the water table in the area. The compound does not have any tree and the role of women in the trust or management is negligible. The temple festivals coincide with the harvest season. The story goes that the temple received its name from the community of ‘thachans’ a Malayalam word meaning ‘makers’ or ‘craftsmen’ who were the earlier residents of the place.
3.2.3. Observations
The temple management members and the locals are very proud of the cultural aspects of the temple and are particular about the rituals performed and practiced as a part of the festivities. However, the current management practices do not value the ecological aspects of the sacred grove or ‘Kavu’. Land encroachment and changing value systems have reinvented religious practices to the disadvantage of the sacred grove.

4. Conclusions
The management practices should be restructured to have a pluralistic legal mechanism that encompasses forest management law and religious practices to restrict the commercialization of sacred groves.

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