

PIETY PRESERVES

Do not disturb, anymore

Protected by reverence, the sacred groves of the Western Ghats have long conserved natural resources, but not all bodes well for the forests now, notes *Padma Rao*

Whispering leaves greet me and wildflowers enthrall me as I walk through the forest. I look up in wonder at the wild pepper vines clinging to the enormous trees. A pied hornbill flies overhead giving a warning screech. A large beetle slithers up a tree festooned with lianas. I take a deep breath of the scented air and fail to notice a little leech stuck to my toe. "He'll fall off when he has gorged on enough blood," reassures our guide, Suresh. The faint trail is now blocked by a fallen tree, which might have been lying there for years. I step over it with utmost care. For, I'm in a *devara kaan/kaadu/jataka vana/nagavana* or sacred grove in Uttara Kannada, where nothing is ever disturbed, not even a dead tree.

Situation now

The Western Ghats, one of the sensitive biodiversity hotspots on earth containing more than a third of India's total flora, is a treasure house of amphibians and other creatures, some that still await discovery. Since time immemorial, the people of the region have coexisted with nature. But now, market forces are changing their lifestyle due to which the fragile ecology of the region is endangered.

This has led to the depletion of natural resources, and drought, which was unheard of here some years ago, is frequent.

So, a ray of hope in these bleak times is of course the *devara kaans* or sacred groves of the region, marked as abodes of local deities.

In Karnataka, these groves exemplify the many traditional ways of conserving the biodiversity and maintaining ecological integrity of the region's rain forests.

Being undisturbed natural forests, these groves have a micro-climate of their own.

Some contain perennial waterbodies that keep the temperature down and sustain the inhabitants of the ecosystem.

Journey continues...

The rugged path goes steeply downhill and the dense tree canopy makes the forest dark as we approach the shrine of Deity Chowdi.



Sacred groves of Uttara Kannada; (left) bracket fungus on the forest floor.

Suresh mentions the annual festival held in April. During the festival, the forest echoes with the sound of drums and songs in praise of the deity. Devotees' offerings are for favours received and to ask for a solution to their problems. It is believed that the custom of giving a sacrosanct status to a piece of the forest originated during the times of the Indus Valley Civilisation.

The sacred groves of the Western Ghats have been managed by the local communities as common property. According to a study by the scientists of Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru, "Although their importance in community life is felt through religious-cultural practices,

the sacred groves' utility is also by their life-sustaining services."

The annual leaf fall and dead trees create humus, which can store water and thus benefit the vegetation during summers. The saplings and the lianas calm the air during a storm by reducing the speed of the wind. During summers, the deeply shaded forest floor, with its myriad life forms, is well-protected by the thick leaf litter. The springs, which abound in the forests, are rejuvenated during monsoons.

The recently-proposed biotic pump theory stresses the importance of forests in bringing precipitation to the landmass. The extensive research carried out in Uttara Kannada and Kodagu by the scientists of IISc concludes that the tradition of sa-

cred groves is "the best example of sustainable natural resource-management system."

A frog leaps across our way. "A new frog was discovered here by scientists recently," says Suresh. I ask him whether the other sacred groves in the region also have such dark forests with undiscovered species. He shakes his head ruefully, "Thick forests are rare to come across even in the sacred groves these days," and adds, "People lope the trees in some groves and let their cattle graze." There is no fencing around many groves, which leads to cattle grazing.

With rapid urbanisation in the Western Ghats, the sacred groves are under threat. The area of a number of groves has diminished considerably due to land conversion for establishing plantations and building temples. Invasive species like acacia and eupatorium at the borders of the grove change the microclimate of the place and reduce the number of species. Local people collect the precious leaf manure from the forest floor, disturbing the forest ecology.

According to Dr Madhav Gadgil (in *Down-ToEarth*), 'the root cause of their decline is not waning of religious or cultural beliefs, but an assault on the sacred groves by commercial forces with active support from the state machinery.'

The forest department has taken measures for the conservation of the sacred groves with the help of village-forest committees, temples and youth forums.

A number of volunteer groups educate people and trekkers about the importance of protecting the groves. The Western Ghats Task Force has ensured a permanent project for a state-wide conservation of the sacred groves. The *devara kaans* of the district have been identified and registered. The *mathas* of the region are encouraging their followers to protect and nourish the sacred groves.

As we walk through the darkening forest, I think of the wisdom of the those who have left us the invaluable forests and wonder if their conservation measures will serve an example across our country.

WAY TO GO...

When Francis Buchanan, a British officer, toured the North Canara region in 1801, he was amazed by the vastness of the sacred groves near Kadra. He wrote that its people save the trees for their gods, thus depriving the government of valuable timber.

The sacred groves have shrunk in area considerably now, but they are still places of immense biodiversity. These smaller groves are sound ecologically, mainly because of the tradition associated with them as well as the fear of the protective deity of the grove. Some of the groves are fenced to prevent unauthorised entry.

The coastal *nagabanas* (sacred groves) are protected by forest *panchayats*, a practice started by Collins in the 1920s.

The Karnataka Biodiversity Board has initiated registers of local biodiversity in *gram panchayats*, who are advised not to give publicity to rare and unique species.

Restricting entry of people into a *devara kaan/ kadu* would go a long way in conserving these biomes.

Innovative approaches suggested by scientists like carbon credit, restoration programmes and incentives for conservation of rare and threatened endemic species could also be introduced.

With inputs from Shivananda Kalave, a biodiversity expert



Perennial waterbodies maintain the temperature of the sacred groves. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

“It is believed that the custom of giving a sacrosanct status to a piece of the forest originated during the times of Indus Valley Civilisation.”

Friendship anchors a harvest fest

MICHAEL PATRAO

The Portuguese arrived in Goa in 1510 and began their trade. Their activities, both religious and secular, expanded and soon they landed in Mangaluru. The Portuguese traders used the Netravathi river route for their trade as the river joins the Arabian Sea.

In 1526, some priests of the Franciscan order entered the then South Canara and established three churches around Mangaluru — the Lady of Rosario or Rosario Church in Bolar, close to the confluence of River Netravathi and the Arabian Sea; Our Lady of Mercy at Ullal; and St Francis of Assisi at Farangipet.

When the Portuguese first arrived in Mangaluru, traders among others, the people called them *farangi*, a local term for foreigners. They settled along the banks of the Netravathi, and the locality in which they lived was called Farangipet or Farangipete, about 15 km from Mangaluru. 'Pete' means town or marketplace. It was a Portuguese trade outpost.

Not long after their arrival, the church Monte Mariano was established on a hillock overlooking River Netravathi. Monte Mariano is Por-



It was in Monte Mariano Church, Mangaluru that the Monti Fest was celebrated first. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

tuguese for 'Mount of Mary'. Today, it incorporates St Fidelis Friary and St Francis Assisi Church. The campus is dotted with coconut trees and areca nut palms.

Monarch & priest

There is a carved wooden statue of St Francis of Assisi, said to be 500 years old. The statue of the saint holds a cross and a Bible. A statue of Infant Mary in the chapel was brought from Italy.

When Hyder Ali conquered the

Bednore kingdom in 1763, Fr Joachim Miranda, a Goan, served as the first parish priest here. Hyder Ali sought his favour and asked for his prayers for the success of his military campaigns by making offerings to the church. The priest won the heart and friendship of Hyder Ali. A copper plate given by Hyder Ali authorised the rights of land for worship.

At the entrance of Monte Mariano is a silver-hued statue of Mary. An inscription at the bottom of the

statue reads, 'At the feet of this statue, the soldiers of Hyder Ali and those of Tipu Sultan were lighting candles.'

It was Fr Miranda who first introduced the Monti Fest, celebrated as a harvest festival. The nativity festival of St Mary, mother of Jesus, was first celebrated at Monte Mariano to coincide with the annual feast of the church. The term *monti* is derived from the word *monte*. The harvest festival is a Hindu tradition adopted by Mangalorean Catholics, many of

whom were agriculturists.

Nine days before the main feast, people attend the nine-day *novena*, signifying devotion to St Mary, something similar to the *Navaratri*. Traditionally, during this period, people opt for only vegetarian fare. Children offer flowers to Mary and sing hymns in her honour.

Revelry

On the festival day, bunches of newly-harvested paddy stalks are blessed in the church and a sheaf is

carried home by every Catholic and symbolically consumed as the first meal of the newly harvested grain. Sugarcane is distributed among children. The new corn is then taken home, de-husked, powdered and served in milk or coconut milk, and jaggery. It signifies the first meal after harvest.

It is a time-honoured custom to have a vegetarian meal on a banana leaf comprising varieties in odd numbers. These generally include ridge gourd, bitter gourd, string

beans, ladies' finger, gherkins, cucumber, colocasia leaves and stems, and green gram.

These vegetables were popular because they were grown by the people themselves in their fields or garden. Today, urbanites get it from the vegetable market.

In the past, this fest was celebrated on a grand scale at Monte Mariano. The surrounding parishes also participated in it. Some devotees walked from Mangaluru to Farangipet to participate in it. The fest continues to be celebrated by the Catholics of Mangaluru on September 8. It's also a feast that unites Mangaloreans worldwide.

Today, Farangipet is a place buzzing with activity along the Bengaluru-Mangaluru highway, but Monte Mariano, just off the main road, continues to be an oasis of calm — verdant, just as it would have been during the days of the Portuguese. And the river Netravathi quietly flows nearby.

FEEDBACK

Send your ideas and comments to: spectrum@deccanherald.co.in or [Spectrum, c/o Deccan Herald#75, M G Road, Bengaluru-560001](mailto:Spectrum,c/o Deccan Herald#75, M G Road, Bengaluru-560001)