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Rapid urbanisation, change in style of worship threaten 'devara kaadus'

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Fear of being cursed by the local deity ensured 'devara kaadus' (sacred groves) remained pristine for generations, but these groves increasingly face the threat of being destroyed. There are a sizeable number of sacred groves in districts along the Western Ghats like Shivamogga, Kodagu, Chikkamagaluru and Uttara Kannada, but they are slowly being encroached.

In Kodagu, a district rich in flora and fauna, about 2% of forests are considered sacred groves. Three taluks — Madikeri, Virajpet, and Somwarpet — account for a total of 2,500 acres of sacred groves. Forest department records show that an estimated 508 groves are in Virajpet taluk, while Somwarpet has 400 and Madikeri 306. They are known for their rich bio-diversity and flora. But urbanization and changes in style of

worship threaten the very existence of these groves.

Sacred groves, also known as kans, are part of day-to-day life and play an important role in the beliefs of local communities. Researchers estimate that as many as 120 deities are worshipped in kans across the district and 18 communities use them for worship.

"Bhadra Kaali and Aiyyappa are the major deities," said Poornima Seregar, a researcher from Kushalnagar, Madikeri. "In many places, even 'Kutti Chata' is worshipped. After the August 2018 floods and landslides, awareness of the importance of 'devara kaadus' has increased."

Devara kaadu utsav

However, locals bemoan the steady loss of groves.

“In the past couple of decades, efforts have been taken to protect these groves,” said Vinu Ganapaiah, a resident of Madikeri. “Festivals to highlight their importance, like the Devara Kaadu Utsav, which was launched in 2000 by activists, organisations and the academicians in Virajpet, is now being held in many other places in the district. But the attack on these groves has continued. Concrete is slowly taking over greenery.”

A report titled ‘Environment Impact Assessment of the Proposed Linear Projects in Kodagu District’ prepared by IISc scientists TV Ramachandra, Bharath Setturu, Vinay S, Vishnu D Mukri and GR Rao in December 2018, states that sacred groves are a “living tradition” in Kodagu. The district has at least one grove for every 300 hectares owned by the forest department, but the groves are managed by local communities as common property resources. Two dozen villages in the district have more than 10 sacred groves which support unique flora and fauna. But now, trees are being cut down and villas and temples are springing up their place.

Critical to biodiversity

Shivamogga too abounds with sacred groves, although not as many as in Kodagu. There are about a dozen sacred groves across the district. Experts say most have female deities like Rachamma and Banashankari. Locals fear even plucking a flower or leaf, but since the groves come under the revenue department — unlike in Kodagu where they come under the forest department — encroachment is rampant.

Ananth Hegade Ashisara, president of the Vruksha Laksha movement and former chairman of the state Western Ghats Task Force, said that in Shivamogga district, kans are critical to biodiversity.

“Halesorabkan (250 acres), and Hosagunda (750 acres), are bio-diversity hotspots,” Ashisara said. “In 2006, we began a movement to protect groves by bringing all locals in Shivamogga and the Uttara Kannada districts together. The kans were

protected by digging trenches around them and fencing them. Various organisations put great efforts to preserve them. We will soon launch a survey to assess protection measures.”

Shashi Sampalli, a journalist and activist from Shivamogga, said sacred groves are unique for many reasons. “There is no clear reason why these groves got the name ‘devara kaadu,’” he said. “But locals have a very close relationship with them.”

In Mudigere, Kalasa, Sringeri, Koppa in the Malnad region, deities like Choudamma, are worshipped in temples inside the forest areas. “But now, in the name of rejuvenation, groves are losing their original shape,” says Prakash K Shet, a resident of Koppa.

Aravind Malagatti, writer, folklore researcher, said sacred groves can be found in tribal hamlets of Mysuru and Chamarajanagar. “Maramma is a deity of trees as is Yallamma. These deities are worshipped by tribal communities. They treat every tree like a goddess.”

KERALA MODEL OF WORSHIP

The need of the hour is awareness, locals say. “Locals continue to fear the wrath of gods and their supernatural powers,” says Jaya Kumar, a resident of Madikeri. “But the challenge is to convince devotees that the pristine nature of the groves should not be replaced with the Kerala model of worship where cement and stone structures are given more importance.”