Interventions

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Translation of Space: Environmental Conservation and the Role of *Sarppakaavu* in Kerala

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Abstract

Sacred groves in India exist as part of religious beliefs and are spaces which are believed to be 'holy'. By offering rituals and ritualistic performances on a regular basis this sacred 'nature' of the space is maintained and carried forward. It was a general practise in olden times to dedicate a small portion of a family's land as a sacred grove, before turning it into a human settlement. Especially, sacred groves dedicated to serpents (*Sarppakaavu*), were considered as special spaces that should be left alone by humans, other than to light an oil lamp in the evenings. Stone idols of serpents were installed in the groves, but left open to the elements. The main belief being that the serpents, in return for the devotion and the prayers offered, will become the protectors of the family. If they are neglected or the sacred space encroached upon, it is believed that the entire family down to the last member will be faced with ill fortune. This belief has even to this day inspired fear in the successive generations and has helped the sacred groves to be left untouched by the wanton destruction of nature by man in the name of 'development'. This still remains as the main reason behind a small and densely populated state like Kerala still retaining a large number of sacred groves centuries down from the time they were first dedicated as 'holy' spaces. The main aim of my paper is to explore the deep-rooted symbiotic connection between the *sarppakaavu* and the many myths and legends surrounding them, and the intergenerational translation undergone by the space as well as the narratives.

Keywords: snakes, sacred groves, space

A long time before the terms 'ecology' or 'environment' were coined and became current, people in India were aware about the intrinsic connection between Man and Nature. They were also involved in the preservation of plants and animals, rivers, mountains and water bodies by ascribing 'holy' status to these. Certain patches of land were conserved as 'sacred groves' and these were considered

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out of bounds for humans other than for performing rituals during certain times of the year. These green and wild patches of land were maintained by the concerned villages/ settlements and were not to be destroyed or claimed for living by people. All forms of vegetation inside the grove, including shrubs and climbers were believed to belong to the deity. Grazing and hunting were prohibited here and sometimes even the removal of dead wood was considered taboo. Thus, they acted as sanctuaries for flora and fauna equally, while maintaining a clear boundary between the human cultivated areas and the 'wilderness'. In return, the sacred groves provided rare medicinal herbs and helped in maintaining ecological balance, air quality and the level of the water table. They were also a great help in preventing soil erosion during heavy monsoons. In Kerala the number of small and large sacred groves in existence amounts to thousands. Most of these are dedicated to certain gods and goddesses like Ayyappan, Bhadrakali, Yakshi etc. and to snakes, monkeys and other animals. Of these the most widely seen are the ones dedicated to the Snakes, the *Sarppakaavu* (*sarppam* means serpent and *kaavu* means sacred grove in Malayalam).

The term 'Ophiolatry' is defined by *Merriam-Webster Online Encyclopedia* as the worship or attribution of sacred or divine nature to snakes. The term 'ophidian' means a member of the snake family. According to James Fergusson, serpent worship "ranks among the earliest forms through which the human intellect sought to propitiate the unknown powers".[i] It is an astonishing fact that Serpent worship is spread almost all around the world, with roots in many of the ancient civilizations. Most of these developed a basis of nature worship and animism. Thus, serpent worship still has a conflicting status with organized religion. For some, it is still a thorn in the flesh, while others tried to 'appropriate' it in to the fold. Many religions view snakes as the sign of evil, while others view them as protectors, symbols of god or even as divine ornaments. There are some like Hinduism, which hold the view that there can be both good and evil serpents.

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Coming down to the south of India, the concentration of temple structures and sacred groves increases, especially in the state of Kerala. According to the Environmental Information System of Kerala (ENVIS)[ii], the state currently has roughly 1500 sacred groves (ranging from a single tree to a few hectors wide) and the majority of them are dedicated to the serpents. The connection between snakes and the state begins with the myth related to the formation of the Kerala landscape. Historians are still divided about the arguments regarding the historicity of serpent worship in Kerala. One group leads the argument that even before the arrival of Brahmins in Kerala, there existed a large indigenous tribe of people who were serpent worshippers. According to the former, the members of this group were nature worshippers, but not part of the Hindu religion. They were called 'Nagas' and later came to be called 'Nairs', which is still a caste name in Kerala[iii]. Whatever the case, serpent worship is today an integral part of the Malayali culture. The curious case is that, the worship of snakes is not restricted to one region or religion in this state. There are some Syrian Christian Churches in places like Idappalli, Aruvithura etc. where devotees offer prayers to Saints for protection from snake bites. There are also some mosques in and around Travancore region which are connected to serpent worship. There are numerous myths and legends associated with such places of worship, indicating the integral part played by serpent worship in the culture of the land.

Stories concerning the divine status and magical powers of serpents in India mainly originate from Hindu mythologies. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have side stories about the members of the *AshttaNagas* including Shesha, Vasuki, Thakshaka, Karkodaka etc. The temple legends connected to the origin of many of the prominent serpent worship centers in Kerala, have their roots from these mythologies. There are also an amazing number of stories and folklores connected to each of these

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temples which narrate the miracles and incidents that have taken place there. Some of these stories became legends, and then acquired the status of myths to the later generation of people connected to these worshipping centers.

If one were to delve into the historical background of serpent worship in Kerala, then it will invariably lead to Parashurama and the Hindu myths related to the origin/formation of the Kerala landscape. Books such as *Kerala Charithram Vol. I, Prachina Keralam, Pulluvanpaattum Nagaradhanayum* etc. argue that serpent worship in Kerala is at least as old as the land's origin. Aryans refer to Kerala landscape as 'Ahi bhoomi', or the land of the 'Ahi' or snakes and the Western Ghats as 'Sahyadhri' ('Sa' + 'Ahi' + 'Aadri'), which can be roughly translated as the mountains abounding with snakes. Certain Mythology books and Tamil epics consider Kerala region as the boundary of the mythical 'Nagalokam'. This is mainly because, most of the geographical area of Kerala is below sea level and the people who inhabited here were serpent worshippers since the ancient times (qtd.in. Jayakumarikunjamma 13). Whatever the case, serpent worship is an important part of Hindu religion in Kerala. The proof of this can be seen in the existence of small and large sacred groves dedicated to the serpents all across the state. Another interesting aspect is the presence of the serpent deities as separate installations in almost all temples across the state. The primary deity of a temple, could be Shiva/Vishnu/ Karthikeya/ Durga/ Parashurama etc., nevertheless, the temple will have a separate space for the worship of the serpent as a minor deity there.

The connection between snakes and sacred groves can be traced back to the ancient times of Nature worship, when there was no organized religion or idol worship. Snakes, as part of nature, induced fear in the minds of the inhabitants of the forests. They were also worshipped along with the trees and thus gained the status of 'sacred beings, guardians or protectors of nature. Thus, worship became a form of control of the powers of nature and its ability to harm human beings. It should be

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surmised that the idol worship of serpents began with the coming of Aryans to Kerala. Most of the important serpent worship centers in Kerala like Mannarashala Nagaraja Temple, Vetticode Nagaraja Temple etc. claim their origins by the hands of Parashurama himself. It is said that Prashurama got the help of the serpents of the Nagaloka to make the land claimed from the sea airable. Hence, he instructed the Brahmins, to whom he distributed the land, to worship them. There are different arguments regarding this point (Chembra 23). Whatever the case may be, the point to be noted is that, most of the villages and ancestral houses in Kerala have sacred groves attached to it. These are green patches of land that have withstood the test of time and the encroachment of 'development'. They are also a safe haven for flora and fauna of different kinds. The main reason for this is the religious beliefs attached to a sacred grove and its connection with serpents. They have been worshipped as guardian deities of wealth, prosperity and health of generations of people in a family or a village. Even now, this belief prevents people from harming or killing a snake, and thereby, incurring the curse of the serpents on the entire family.

In olden times when the human population was not high and most of the land was covered in verdant forest, it was a general practice, especially in Kerala, to dedicate a small portion of the South-West part of a family's land or the *Kannimoola*as a sacred grove, if a certain plot was chosen for human settlement. This space would be left unclear of the flora and fauna and minimal human intrusion was allowed, that too at certain times of the day. Especially, sacred groves dedicated to serpents, were considered as special spaces that should be left alone by humans, other than to light an oil lamp in the evenings. This was mainly due to the fear induced by the snakes and the possibility of getting bitten by them. Even now people do not normally stay inside a *sarppakaavu* after dusk. A sarppakaavu usually consists of Stone idols of serpents installed usually under a large tree, but left open to face the elements. The main belief being that the serpents, in return for the

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devotion and the regular prayers offered, will become the protectors of the family. If they are neglected or the sacred space encroached upon, it is believed that the entire family down to the last member will be faced by ill fortune. This belief has even to this day inspired deep-rooted fear in the minds of the successive generations and has helped in the sacred groves to be left untouched to a certain extent by the wanton destruction of nature by humans in the name of development.

This fear has been further supported and reinstated through the existence of narratives in the form of myths and place legends surrounding these groves. Every culture has its own age-old myths and legends, narratives that portray the connection between humans and non-humans. Michael Cronin in his work, *Eco-Translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene*, points out that "in every deep history or great story we are confronted by a narrative of human/ non-human connectedness. The human is inconceivable without the non-human other. That connectedness is based however, on a practice of translation." (68) He further goes on to explain this argument by introducing the concept of a 'tradosphere', which is "the sum total of all translation systems on the planet that allow humans to interact in a viable and sustainable way with other sentient and non-sentient beings". By applying Cronin's argument on to the narratives related to Snake worship in Kerala which are intergenerational transmissions in the form of *pulluvanpattu*, *sthalapuranam* or place legends and stories of miracles based on serpent worship centres, we can see that these collections of stories lend strength to the belief of people and it still remains as the main reason behind a small and densely populated state like Kerala still retaining a large number of sacred groves centuries down from the time they were first dedicated as 'sacred' spaces. The sacred spaces exist thanks to the belief system of the people and these systems in turn are propagated and maintained through the different narratives related to the space. The fear and respectful devotion the believers feel towards the space and the belief system is further paved by the existence and

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atmosphere provided by the snakes and other flora and fauna. The 'sacredness' attributed to them is what is shared from the space as well as from believer's fear of angering the deity. The snakes are not harmed while inside the sacred grove, thereby providing a safe haven for them. At the same time, the existence of a suitable and safe habitat means that the snakes will prefer to stay away from the surrounding human occupied spaces and hence, less casualty to both species. This may have been the underlying reason for the ancestors to develop the idea of sacred groves, defining the 'lived space' while maintaining a small area of 'wilderness' so as to keep the balance between humans and nature. E. Unnikrishnan's motivation to call a sacred grove as an "Eco-cultural landscape" is the same as above. A patch of wilderness gets a wider meaning; it becomes 'special' by the sacredness brought to it by the idols and their continued worship by the people (22).

The situation can be further comprehended by gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of the space around us which we take for granted. Henri Lefebvre classifies space in to natural and social space. According to him nature's space is not staged and is spontaneous, while the latter is created through human labour, interaction and habitation (*The Production of Space,* 70). Thus, social space is expanded through the consumption of already existing natural space. Sacred groves are such patches of 'natural' space which continue to exist mainly because of the 'sacredness' attributed to it by human beliefs and customs and the fear of the perceived wrath of its resident god. This does not mean that the groves are safe. The latest and unfortunate trend in Kerala is to hold a *kaavumattam*, a set of rituals held by a priest in order gather the power of the snake god of the *Sarppakaavu*in to the idols and then shift the idols to a major serpent worship centre in Kerala like Mannarashaala or Vettikode. The grove after the *kaavumaattam* is treated as a normal piece of land and thus, available to be sold or used for construction of buildings.

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Why cannot a piece of property belonging to a person be reclaimed for building a house or some other human purpose, why should it be left for the vegetation to grow 'wild'? These are the questions that usually lead to the destruction of most sacred groves. Michael Cronin talks about Human exceptionalism, the notion that human kind is radically different and apart from the rest of nature and from other animals (69). This notion leads to the reckless exploitation of nature and its resources without any care for the future and the well-being of rest of the world. Through the thoughtless and wilful destruction of minor eco systems like sacred groves, we are not only wiping out nature's wealth preserved by our forefathers but also denying its benefits to our future generations.

In his thesis[iv] on Sacred Groves of Kerala, Dr. Rajendraprasad describes them as "self-generating, self-sustaining ecosystems" where "in situ or onsite conservation" takes place. He describes sacred groves as "tracts of virgin forests; the vestiges of an ancient practice in which people protected forest patches to avoid the perceived wrath of its resident God". This is because the concept of a sacred grove or *kaavu* of Kerala in its complete sense includes not just a piece of land and the flora and fauna occupying it. It is supposed to have three main elements to be considered complete; the piece of land that forms the grove along with the stone idol installations, the water body(s) attached to it, usually in the form of a small pond or spring, and the trees and other vegetation facing the sky above[v]. The marked difference between a sacred grove and a 'temple'[vi] lies in the fact that the 'deity' in the form of the serpent idols are left unprotected from the elements. There is no concrete, wood or stone structure to isolate and 'protect' them nor a sanctum sanctorum to offer daily prayers. The space is a confluence of the three different elements of earth, water and air; and the idol installations which share a symbiotic relationship to each other's continued existence. There is a popular saying in Kerala, which when roughly translated means 'a single tree cannot form a sacred

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grove'. Only if all the elements involved come together can a sacred grove serve its true purpose (Chembra 66). A lone tree along with some idols placed below it cannot fulfil the functions of a minor ecosystem. The irony of the current age is that, most people have forgotten this fact and rampantly encroached upon the land of sacred groves, and a large number of these now have been reduced to exist in the form of few idols installed under a single tree. The bigger purpose and the core meaning behind the need for such spaces have been lost to the modern generation. Even these 'single tree' groves are now facing the axe, literally, in many joint family plots as a result of property disputes. To facilitate the 'smooth' handling of the erstwhile sacred groves, priests are invited to safely 'transfer' the idols to the concerned main Serpent worship centres. Thus, the gods themselves become 'homeless' and a visit to any famous serpent worship centre in Kerala can show you their plight as 'migrants' occupying a forgotten existence. The large number of idols strewn across these Centres might appear as a curious attraction to any visitor, but the point missed by those without a discerning eye is that each 'homeless' idol signifies one less sacred grove in existence and the death of one more self-sustaining ecosystem.

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[i]As qtd. by. Sinha pg.56.
[ii]http://www.kerenvis.nic.in/Database/SacredGroves_1433.aspx#
[iii]Chembra 24.
[iv]Rajendraprasad M. "The Floristic, Structural and Functional Analysis of Sacred Groves of Kerala". 1995.
[v]Suma Prabhakaran, 79.
[vi]What is called as Serpent worship centres or *sarppaaaradhanakendram* are modern day temple structures that have evolved from famous sacred groves in different parts of Kerala. Some parts of the grove are cleared of flora and fauna so as to be 'human friendly' and built in the form of a Hindu temple. Some others have unfortunately ceased to exist as a grove and have been completely converted into concrete temples.

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