Sacred groves as rich pockets of biodiversity in the Kodagu district

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Abstract

Sacred groves, known as Devarakadu (which literally means God’s forest) in Kodava language, are rich forest pockets in the Kodagu district. It is a legacy of the people of Kodagu who understood the importance of the forest and biodiversity. The Kodavas usually install the stone idols of Bhadrakali and Aiyappa in sacred groves. All the villagers worship these deities periodically and on special occasions. Village temple committees are also formed to protect the sacred groves and perform the rituals. The first survey of the sacred groves was conducted in 1873 by the British administrators—scholars. They located 873 groves covering a total area of about 4398 hectares. In the second survey in 1905, the area was found to be 6277.73 hectares. These groves were transferred to the Revenue Department in the same year. In 1985, the groves were again handed over to the Forest Department.

Introduction:

Coorg is also known as Kodagu, a hilly area with varied physical features within the district. It is a beautiful paradise situated about 1270 metres from the sea level. The hills are very close and have deep valleys. The whole of Coorg is a green country where grassy hills are divided by evergreen forested valleys, with a rich flora and fauna. Kaveri is the major river of the district. Home of natural beauty Coorg is rightly called “Kashmir of the South” and “Switzerland of India”. The district is divided into three taluks, Madikeri, Virajpet, Somwarpet, and the headquarters is in Madikeri.

The Kodavas are the major dominant caste found in the district. The Kodavas worship the river Kaveri, the incarnation of goddess Parvati. They also worship Bhagavathi, Kali, Igguthappa, Subramanya, Aiyappa and Chaundi or Chamundi. The Karona is an offered sacrifice by killing fowl and sometimes pigs once a year on festive occasions. They believe that the village deities such as Kulia, Chaundi and Bira, the spirits of the dead heroes or warriors protect the cattle, property as well as health of the village folk. The village deities do not have temples, but they live in the village forests known as “devarakadu”, the sacred groves which are looked upon with utmost care, and nobody is allowed to cut trees or plants in such forests. Whole these are
the best preserved forests of Coorg, in the recent years encroachment of land has been increasing. At some places serious steps have been taken to punish the encroachers.

Every village in Coorg District have a devarakadu comprising a minimum of 5 acres to a maximum of 50 acres of thick forest. This devarakadu is protected by the village temple committee. An annual village festival is conducted in these local temples surrounded by a devarakadu without caste, creed or religion differences, with pomp and pageantry. The valuable timber species are protected by the villagers and these devarakadu are the sole property of the Government. The soil and green leaves are used by the locals for agricultural purposes, and the timber can be used for construction or renovation of local temples with prior permission of the Government.

In the revenue settlement of Coorg 1910 Devarakadu is defined as follows- “Devarakadu are sacred forests usually assigned to some particular deity or temple. The right to take firewood for temple worship, materials for constructing pandals (with special permission), timber for repairing temples are allowed to the temple authorities and servants, while the villagers generally have the rights of way and water of grazing and hunting, especially during the Kailmuhurtha and Huthari festivals. As per the notification issued by the chief commissioner issued under the section 28 of the Indian Forest Act 1878 Devarakadus have been classified as protected forests but the rights of the individuals existed at the time were protected.

In 1899 the Coorg Land and revenue Regulations rule stated that the regulation was not applicable to the Devarakadu which are governed by the ruled framed under section 29 to 32 of the 1927 Indian Forest Act. Even though it was not considered as Revenue land it was managed by the Revenue Department.

In 1900 there were 900 Devarakadus in the Coorg district. But at present there are only 246 devarakadus left. Some of them have been clubbed together at the time of the original survey and revenue settlement and some devarakadus have been de-reserved by the then chief commissioner and granted to individuals and utilized for other purposes.

As there were continuous encroachment of Devarakadu lands, the Government thought of converting devarakadu lands as reserve forests and as per the powers vested with the government under Sec.71 of KLR Act 1964 it ordered the transfer of all the Devarakadu lands in the Coorg district from Revenue Department to the Forest Department to maintain the same as Reserve Forests without prejudice to the traditional privileges and the rights of the temples and the villagers concerned. Pursuant to the above said Government order the Forest Department started surveying the Devarakadu as and when the survey was completed and notifications issued, the Forest authorities send the notifications to the concerned officer. The 1987 government order states that the temples are entitled to 90% of the cost of timber exploited from the Devarakadu.

Conclusion

Devarakadu, a forest or grove dedicated to a deity is under threat. On one hand the villagers are serious about the preservation of these sacred groves in the name of tradition and culture. However some of the area are encroached upon by the locals for coffee and cardamom cultivation. It has been
detected and such encroachment has been removed by the District administration and still some of the area is remaining for aeration. The villagers have stood up to the decision that these sacred forests would not be destroyed at any cost. Periodical offerings to the gods, annuuals fairs, performance of pooja by the Kodava families and other villagers have helped the temple authorities to retain their identity to some extent.

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