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Sacred Groves: **A Lasting Form of Forest Conservation in Coorg, Karnataka**

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TAMILNADU, India

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Mr. Peter B. Martin
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Dear Peter,

I recently took a short jaunt into the sacred groves and temple forests of Coorg, a small district in the South Indian state of Karnataka (Figure 1, page 2). Coorg is the anglicized version of the district's Kannada name, Kodagu. Kodagu is wedged in the foothills of the Western Ghats and shares the tropical lushness of its southern neighbor, Kerala (Figure 2, page 2). I learned of Coorg's sacred groves from an internationally-circulated forestry journal. The authors of the article, Dr. M.G. Chandrakanth, an agricultural economist, and his elder brother, M.G. Nagaraja, a mathematician-turned-historian, accompanied me and translated for me on this without-a-moment-to-waste, 22-hour journey.

Coorg was formerly a small kingdom ruled by its own royal family. The Kodagas, or Coorgs, most likely migrated into what was to become their homeland in the third century AD. According to local lore their founder was a member of the Kadamba dynasty, which took its name from the sacred Kadamba tree (*Anthocephalus cadamba*). Local entrepreneurs and merchants traded extensively with and were influenced by the Moors and the British. The Coorgs were known to be "fierce, irascible, superstitious and revengeful." They were constantly waging war for their Rajah to protect their tiny kingdom. The last of the Coorg Rajahs fell to the British in 1834, opening up fertile ground to coffee planters and missionaries. Under Company (British East India Co.) reign, local missionaries found the Coorgs' character infected by "drunkenness, sexual licentiousness and lying." Previously the Rajah kept such behavior under control by chopping off appropriate body parts. With the end of continuous war and killing *ad libitum* by the Rajah, the native Coorg population increased by 25,000,000 within the first 10 years.

The British described the countryside as the "Scotland of India." One missionary wrote that Coorg "resembles the finest park scenery in Europe" (Moegling, 1855). The kingdom was incorporated into India and the state of Karnataka in 1956, nine years after Indian independence.

The Cauvery River originates in the Brahmagiri Hills of Coorg. She, Cauvery, is the most important goddess to the Coorgs. Her spring is a sacred spot where an annual festival to celebrate her reincarnation is held every October. The Hindu epic, *Silappadikaram*, gives

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a description of the Cauvery in flood. She is covered with flowers fallen from the numerous trees on her bank. I noticed immediately that Coorg women tie their saris differently than we do in Tamilnadu. The *pallu* (tail end of the sari), which we carefully fold, pin to and drape over the left shoulder, is left loose by Coorg women, passed around the back and pinned to the right shoulder. The fashion originates in a Cauvery legend. When she first gushed forth from her holy spring, Cauvery quickly had to maneuver around a sharp right bend; "the violence of the stream turned the knots of the women's dresses round to their backs." The women of Coorg clasp their saris to the right shoulder to represent this symbolic turn. However, the worship of forest deities in Coorg and throughout India is probably older than this fashion statement.

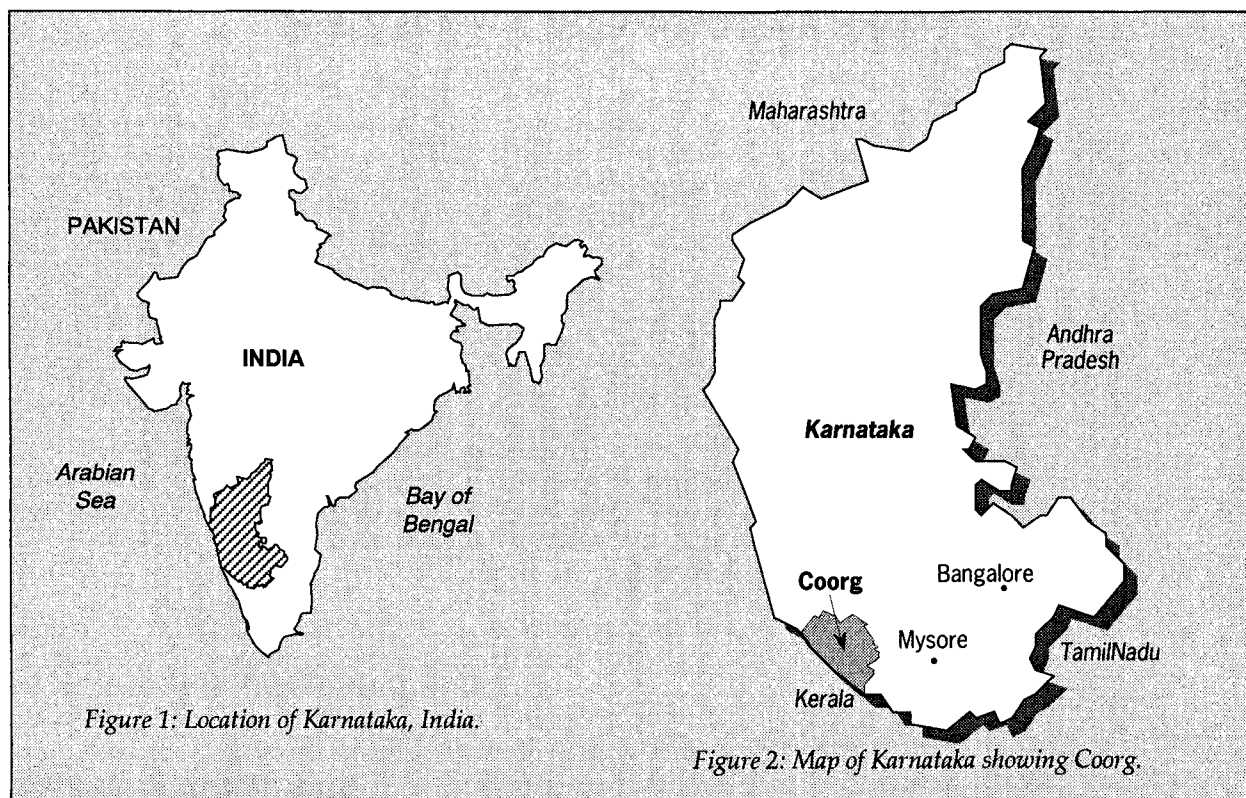
Sacred groves are a form of nature worship dating back to the ancient civilizations of the Indus Valley. Excavated sculptures from 4000 B.C. show symbols of deities wearing fig leaves. Texts from the same era have poems dedicated to the forest goddess, Aranyani, worshipped as mother of forest flora, fauna and forest ecology (Chandrakanth and Nagaraja, 1994). Today during Coorg's annual *kunda betta* festival, devotees wear sacred tree leaves as they offer their prayers.

The Hindu epics glorified the forest. In these texts one finds the earliest references to sacred groves or entire sacred forests. The early Indo-Aryans worshipped nature, began to conserve plants with curative properties, attributed divine powers to these plants and finally provided each plant with a guar-

dian deity. Sanctions against the destruction of nature took form from mysticism and magic.

Sages and saints lived in the forest leading simple but rigorous lives in their search for truth and perfection. Kings and their sons sought out sages for their wisdom. They would spend weeks at a time in the forest learning the Vedic truths under the sprawling branches of the forest's largest trees. According to sages only beneath a tree could one find the proper discipline to receive spiritual instruction from a teacher. Sages may be responsible for the initial transfer of medicinal knowledge to the general public. Through trial and error they studied and recorded the medicinal properties of the forest. Many trees are the subject of Hindu prayers and poems describing their special significance and the spirits dwelling within them (Prime, 1995). These early poems passed on information about the relationship between humans and the forest community. The forest was perceived as a place of peace and contentment and a place to pursue a spiritual life. The first record of a sacred grove, written in those exact words, is found in ancient Sanskrit literature. In the *Ramayana* the kidnapped Sita was hidden in the sacred Ashoka grove.

According to Hindu tradition there are three types of forest. *Shravan* is the forest of prosperity. *Tapovan* is the type of forest where the sages contemplated life and sought truth. The last type of forest is *mahavana*, the natural forest where all species of plant, animal and human life find shelter. People knew what type of ecosystem was necessary for survival. In ancient times the clearing of forest for agricultural settlements with-



out establishing another type of forest was forbidden. It was not that trees should be in the village, but that the village should be among trees. Therefore villagers protected much of the forest cover surrounding their settlements as a *shrivan*, a forest of wealth. A village was considered incomplete unless there was one of the above-mentioned categories of forest in and around it (Prime, 1995). *Shrivan* is also referred to as a grove and was often donated to and looked after by the temple. Many of the forests protected by temples are today's sacred groves. It is also believed that early people understood the role that forests play as carbon sinks and in maintaining air quality. The size of a sacred grove reflected the population of the village, its spatial distribution, the villagers' fuelwood consumption and the demands of livestock and wildlife populations (Yellappa Reddy, pers. comm.).

Tapovan was important to the spiritual well-being of local residents and was set aside for the practice of religion. *Tapa* means penance and *vana* means forest. Sages and inspired individuals called *rishis* needed these areas away from civilization. Anyone who desired spiritual comfort could enter the *tapovan* to live and to study in the sages' ashrams. The presence of sages in the forest protected the plant and animal life around them. Violators were punished by the entire community for their criminal acts.

One last natural community that every settlement, rural and urban, must have association with is the *punjavatti*, a cluster of five trees that represents the forest. Each of the five trees (*Ficus religiosa*, *Ficus bengalensis*, *Embllica officinalis*, *Aegle marmelos* and *Saraca indica*) symbolizes one of the five essential elements: earth, water, air, ether and fire (Prime, 1995; Yellappa Reddy pers. comm.). Cattle represent the totality of animal life. For this reason they are free to roam the busiest streets of contemporary Bombay and Madras.

The Coorgs' religion was considered to be unlike most Hindu worship (anti-Brahmanic). Ancestors and demons were at the center of their ritual. Human sacrifices were offered to Bhadrakali, the demonic form of Lord Siva's wife, Parvati, to protect villages from evil influences. Human sacrifices were first replaced by a goat or a male buffalo during British rule. During these pujas the buffalo was tied to a tree "in a gloomy grove near a temple." Coorgs would not perform nor be present at the slaughter. Instead a Meda, who is a member of a wandering tribe, would cut off the beast's head. After the sacrifice the Meda was to spill the victim's blood over a rock under a sacred tree and consume its flesh. During the sacrifice the Coorgs were performing a dance near the temple wearing the horns of spotted deer (Whitehead, 1921: 86-87).

There were forest sanctuaries to the tribal god, *Iyappa*, with Brahmin priests. *Iyappa*, the forest-god and mighty hunter, was naturalized among the Coorgs. Coorgs also adopted the practice of offering

him earthen forms of dogs, tigers and horses during his festivals. They worshipped their ancestors with an annual offering of a cock two months after the beginning of the monsoon. The sacrifice took place, "somewhere in the jungle-land belonging to the family estate. Some have erected small temples at these sites." Many temples were "consecrated" only for the worship of the dead. Monetary offerings to the powerful finale demon, Kuttadamma, were also a form of ancestor-worship. Every year a young man from each family had to go to Kuttadamma's sanctuary in the forest to worship her and donate Rs. 20,000 (today equivalent to US\$650) to the caretaker to engage her powers to destroy the enemies of the sick and deceased.

Trees with a milky sap were sacred to the Coorgs. During the annual sacrifice to Gulika, an invisible constellation belonging to the order of planets and to lunar mansions, the family consulted an astrologer about its powers. Gulika, represented by a stone placed at the base of a tree exuding a milky sap, was offered a fowl, coconut and brandy on a plantain-lined dish. If the family suffered several deaths in the months that followed, they performed a second offering. Special ceremonies protected one's cattle. An annual sacrifice of pork and cakes was made to the deity, Kadevaru (god watching over the cattle). If the sacrifice was not given or was performed incorrectly, the god withdrew his favor, resulting in sickness and death among the cattle.

The above "is but a very imperfect sketch of Coorg-superstition. It may serve, however, to show the character of the monstrous beliefs (*sit venia verbo*), which have sprung up in the darkness of the Coorg-mind. The light of the truth, as it is in Christ, will cause all these rites and imaginations, the offspring of heathen darkness, to vanish, to be forgotten as things of nought. May the sun hasten to rise!" (Moegling, 1855: 69).

The Reverend Moegling's chronicle of distasteful Coorg ritual (as explained to him by new converts) furnishes us with a description of the nature-worship that many naturalists believe accounts for the 30 percent forest cover found in Coorg today (Only 10 percent of India has "good" forest cover). Sacred groves and temple forests might make a significant contribution to pushing the district toward its target of 60 percent. An estimated 346 sacred groves in Coorg cover an area of 4,235 acres. The size of these groves, called *Devara Kadu* (DK, meaning "God's forest" in the local language), ranges between five trees (as mentioned above) and 140 acres (Chandranth and Nagaraja, 1994).

All DKs have elements in common: a temple housing their namesake deity and a place to offer animal sacrifices. Normally they are located on slopes protecting hydrology and enhancing soil stability. This religious institution persists but is under constant financial and education pressure.

*It was spring in the Ashoka¹ grove.
The earth, draped in a shower of flowers fallen from trees,
glittered like a bride adorned with jewels*
— The Ramayana



*Secular authority
...Sacred mission*

I must admit I was stumped when I saw the sign above along the Bangalore-Mysore Road as we headed southwest toward Coorg. Plants on vacation? Earlier this month I had the opportunity to meet with Mr. Yellappa Reddy, the person responsible for this religious compound. Yellappa Reddy has worked for the Forest Department for 35 years and has risen to the position of State Secretary of Ecology and Environment. Over a few cups of coffee in a downtown-Bangalore restaurant we discussed the sacred plants resort and the significance of nature in ancient and contemporary Hindu India.

Planted behind the Sacred Plants Resort's main gate are 150 tree species that have sacred uses during daily ritual and special occasions. During puja services the leaves and flowers of 24 different plants are offered to the deity. Each flower and leaf has a particular mantra associated with it that is recited as it is offered to the god. The combination of flower and leaf offerings is different in each particular month and for each season. Since deforestation and urbanization have intensified in India over the past century, it has become increasingly difficult for worshipers to have a ready and ample supply of the puja's essential flowers and leaves. Today it is very common for worshipers to chant mantras without the offerings because they are not available.

While these 24 tree parts have their significance as offerings to the Hindu gods and demigods, it is also believed that they have positive side effects on the bearer. Chemical analyses of these leaves and flowers show that they all contain essential oils. As they are of-

fered to the deity, they are lightly pressed between the thumb and fingers. The oils that are released stimulate the pineal and pituitary glands. The pituitary gland is important in the system of endocrine glands. Inhaling these oils enhances the cerebral experience of the daily ritual and is a benefit unknown to the average individual. Flowers and leaves are offered systematically with respect to their order and the time allowed to pass between offerings as prescribed by Sages in common prayers. Due to the extensive botanical knowledge acquired by Sages, it is rather likely that they prescribed offerings with these benefits in mind. While modern scientific investigation can tell us which flower and leaf produces which oil and its corresponding benefit, scientists have yet to study the effects of an aggregation of these mingling oils as ordered by the Sages.

A temple to Lord Shiva, or Shiva lingam, was built at the far left-hand corner of the resort. It rises like a wedding cake from a platter of trees. The bottom of the temple is a square platform with four entrances, each at a point of the compass. Next, two lotus-flower-shaped circles with petal-edges bloom out of one another. Resting on top of the smaller lotus is a stack of pastel-pink stars. Rising out of the small yellow triangle, which rests on the smallest star, is the granite lingam. The passage between the platform's entrances and the bottom lotus flower is a tight squeeze. It is meant to be. The difficult pass should make one stop and ponder life. Contemplation opens one's mind and heart like a lotus flower. As one continues to bloom, the ascent begins. Upon reaching the highest star, the individual has reached enlighten-

ment. The triangle illuminates life still further and one starts to become free from lower emotions and beyond earthly matters. The lingam represents ecstasy triggering the soul's kinetic energy. Its shapeless form is the true point of self-actualization and oneness with god.

Within the resort there is also a demonstration plot of the nine-planet forest. Of all the religious forest types (others include star and zodiac forests) recognized by Hindus, the planet forest is the easiest to understand and therefore the most common throughout the county (Chandrakanth et al., 1990). The sun, moon and planets, separately and working in combination, control a person's destiny. The placement of the planets at the time of one's birth determines his or her astrological sign and is consulted later in life to find a suitable marriage partner.





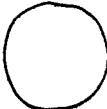




Of these nine planets five are represented by trees, two by shrubs and two by grasses. Planets also have an idol form (Figure 3). The average person can undertake a nine-planet forest as a personal project for the simple design and planting of this forest necessitates only a small piece of land and capital investment. *Calotropis gigantea*, representing the sun, is planted in the center of the plot to correspond with its heavenly position. In rural areas many people begin their day with a short bow of respect to the sun. Saturn (*Acacia ferruginea*), both a son and an enemy of the sun, is planted in the sun's setting, to the west. The economic well-being of an individual is advanced by Venus (*Ficus glomerata*) and is planted in the rising position of the east. To the sun's north is Ju-

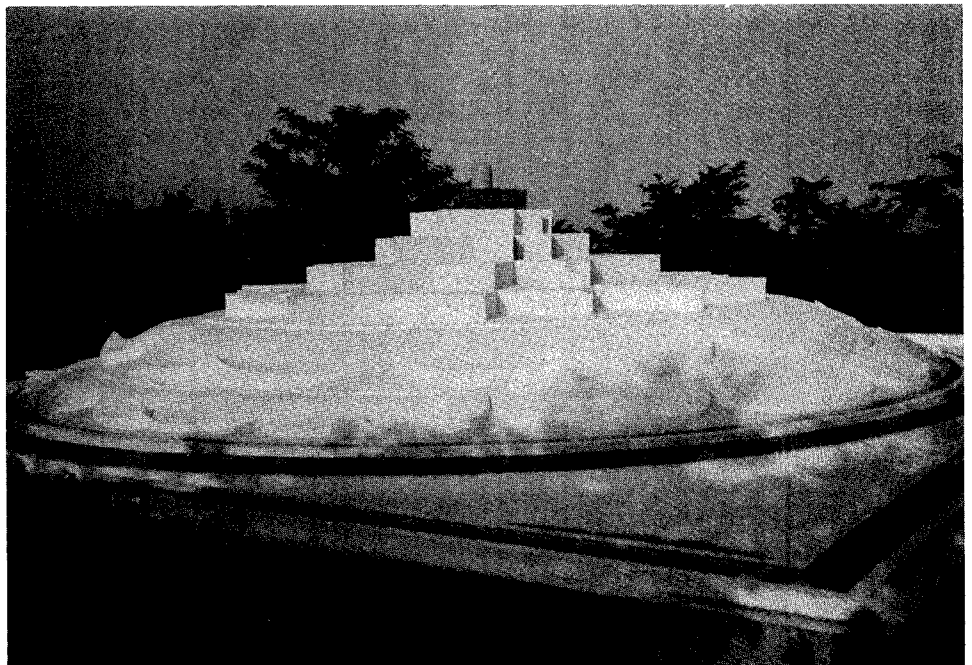
piter (*Ficus religiosa*) thought to exert positive influences. The placement of Mars (*Acacia catechu*) which is thought to cause misfortune, is planted to the sun's south. Perhaps its negative effects are counterbalanced by the direct presence of Jupiter to the north.

Everyone has his or her own tree or group of trees associated with his/her date of birth. People should plant the trees associated with this date in their immediate environment and avoid planting unaffiliated species as these would be detrimental to their physical and mental health. This is the beginning of the Hindus' belief that there is a connection between the mineral composition of humans and plants.

The Sages identified over 77,000 plants, but deemed only 150 as sacred. All of these sacred species have medicinal properties; ten percent cure ailments and the remaining 90% are for prevention and health promotion. Animal products are prescribed by doctors practicing indigenous medicine in only 10-15% of cases. Keeping with the tenet that animal life is sacred, meat and products derived from killing an animal were and still are very rarely recommended. Goat, buffalo and cow milk, curd, buttermilk, ghee, butter, and honey are the animal products usually prescribed. When meat is recommended it is normally fox, goat or crocodile. Many organic tablets are made by mixing melted gold, silver and copper with botanical ingredients. By feeling the depth of the pulse, a doctor can identify a patient's constitution, resistance, character traits, and 60-70% of his or her social and sexual behavior. *Nardee shahtra*, knowledge of pulse, is still used today in herbal medicine.

Figure 3: Nine planet temple forest. From: Chandrakanth and Romm, 1991
Planet name, Idol, Direction of Idol, Position of Idol, Name of Plant.

		
Kethu, Flag South, Northwest <i>Saccharum spontaneum</i>	Jupiter, Rectangle North, North <i>Ficus religiosa</i>	Mercury, Arrow East, Northeast <i>Achyranthus aspera</i>
		
Saturn, Bow West, West <i>Acacia ferruginea</i>	Sun, Circle East, Center <i>Calotropis gigantea</i> var. <i>albiflora</i>	Venus, Pentagon East, East <i>Ficus glomerata</i>
		
Rahu, Winnow South, Southwest <i>Cynodon dactylon</i>	Mars, Inverted Triangle South, South <i>Acacia catechu</i>	Moon, Square West, Southeast <i>Butea monosperma</i>



*The Shiva Lingam at the
Sacred Plants Resort*

The fig tree is associated with the Hindu goddess of fortune, Lakshmi, and is worshipped by barren women in hopes of conceiving a child. There is an old Hindu custom that suggests women rise every morning before 5:30 A.M. (starting as early as 4:01 A.M.). Before sunrise every woman should walk 25 times around the sacred fig tree, *Ficus bengalensis* or *Ficus religiosa*. Since these trees are sacred to both Lakshmi and Lord Vishnu, the creator of all beings, they are present in all villages. It is believed that daily fig-tree rounds produce children who are wise and clever.

Most trees are triggered to switch from respiration to photosynthesis at daybreak with the first rays of the sun. In 1956 scientists discovered that during this early-morning process, the fig tree releases a hormone, called sterotonin, into the atmosphere. According to Yellappa Reddy, sterotonin causes a change in human physiology influencing the mind, especially the pituitary gland. The hormone affects intelligence and assists in controlling the glands responsible for excitement and shock. The early-morning release of sterotonin enriches the natural environment and benefits early-risers. Inhaling the hormone counterbalances excitement and shock, restoring an individual's internal balance. The fig tree is another example of plant-human chemistry demonstrating perfect tolerance in the ecosystem. Furthermore sterotonin helps to prevent headaches and is thought to influence the womb, thus increasing fertility.

The Sacred Plants Resort was established and designed to fulfill several functions. First, to remind (and in today's increasingly cosmopolitan India, to educate) people about the sacred uses of nature. Every plant bears a description of its medicinal properties and its Hindu deity association. Second, to provide the plant material for pujas. Visitors may take home tree seedlings free of charge or for a small do-

nation to the Forest Department. Third, as sacred plants are associated with a deity they are protected by religious sanctions. Reforestation efforts undertaken with sacred species are more likely to be successful in reforesting an area than more "ordinary" ones. Sacred plants are abundant in the natural environment, people benefit from the stimulating oils released into the air without their knowledge. Finally, Yellappa Reddy hopes that this sacred resort administered by a secular authority will restore the importance of plant-human chemistry and harmony.

*"Holy one,
This dark and fearful forest,
With crickets chirping and beasts roaming,
And vultures and other birds screaming,
Filled with boars, lions, tigers, and elephants,
With trees of all kinds - ...
This is a forest
Of insidious and shuddering enchantment "*

—The Ramayana

Our arrival at the Kiratha Ishwara Devara Kadu was a day too late for us to participate in one of the annual festivals held at the end of May. A small canopy constructed of banana leaves and decorated with marigolds and other locally available flowers was standing in front of the two sacred trees in the temple complex's foreground. The two sacred trees, *Ficus bengalensis* and *Mesua ferra*, were surrounded by a three-foot-high stone enclosure. Red, yellow, blue and white triangular pieces of plastic flagging strung on fish-line-thin string were intertwined in their branches. Underneath each tree were rows of ceramic dogs. Most were headless. Small garlands of rose petals and marigolds hung on what remained of some of the dogs' necks. Devotees had placed these dogs here during the previous few days. They are symbolic of prehistoric worship in

a contemporary ceremony. It represents the hunting dog that the indigenous people depended on hundreds of years ago. Hunters would come to this grove to worship and ask for a plentiful hunt. Today, the government forbids hunting but the importance of the ritual to the ancestors has not been forgotten. Several of Ishwara's symbolic tridents are firmly planted beneath the trees. They stick out at all sorts of angles defying any sort of systematic design.

Kiratha Ishwara is the hunter god worshipped by the tribal group, Jenu Kuruba (honey shepherds). The Jenu Kuruba are a subdivision of the Kurumba shepherd tribe that roamed the hills of Karnataka's Mysore Province and farther south into the Nilgiri Hills of Tamilnadu. In the 1891 Mysore Census, Jenu Kurubas are described as, "a darker, inferior race ... subsisting on wild bamboo seed, edible roots etc. found in the jungle, often mixed with honey ... they are engaged chiefly in felling timber in the forests [and] are expert in tracking wild animals." At other moments they were called Jenu Koyyo Shola Nayakas: honey-hunting Lords of the woods. They worshipped forest deities as well as the Hindus' Lord Shiva (who is represented by the trident as is Kiratha Ishwara). They represented their important deceased community members, such as centenarians, with a cluster of stones under a peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) (Thurston, 1909). This latter practice parallels the ancestor worship of their Coorg neighbors.

This recently-completed festival to honor Ishwara is called *Kunde*. Prior to the festival, devotees collect funds in a door-to-door campaign. The funds are divided equally: 50% for temple maintenance and 50% for funding festival activities. The priest said that during the festival, between 4,000 and 5,000 people visit the temple from morning till night to insult Ishwara. They blame him for all of the things that have gone

wrong in the past year. The priest refused to disclose the insults since, "it is very foul and sexy language." Nor does Ishwara become angry with this accusers. "What do parents do when their children insult them?" During the Kunde Festival there is no animal sacrifice, only the offering of coconut. No festival to honor Ishwara's wife, Bhadrakali is complete without the sacrifice of a chicken.

Bhadrakali's temple is approximately 800 meters behind her husband's in an opening in the forest. On the path leading to her shrine are the frames of three makeshift doors that worshipers must pass through before they perform her puja. Each Bhadrakali festival has a certain governing rule such as abstaining from meat or killing animals. Anyone who breaks the rule must pay a small fine and pass through these doors to publicly display his or her mistakes. Coorg worship has a history of human sacrifice. Usually a person who committed several serious errors was "volunteered to make up for them." Bhadrakali worship is comparably friendlier. Today human sacrifice as part of religious ceremony is symbolized by a blood-drawing prick to the pinky finger.

In addition to the Kuruba tribals, Yeravas (former slaves brought from nearby Kerala who were, "bought and sold at a rate much lower than the price of cattle"), and scheduled caste members (Halijans) that include Coorg's indigenous people, the Kembatti, come to worship within the temple and the sacred trees at its entrance. Scheduled caste members are not allowed inside the temple complex. Tribals enter but do not perform puja. Before the presence of a Brahmin priest (200 years ago), the Yeravas and Kembattis worshipped in the temple without a priest. The square complex is a large open courtyard bordered by columned corridors. In the center of a carefully swept courtyard is the temple sanctum. Inside



The tridents and hunting dogs of offered to Kiratha Ishwara during the Kunde festival

the sanctum sanctorum is a black pedestal that incorporates the holy Hindu Trinity, Lord Vishnu, Lord Brahma and Lord Shiva, into one solid form. The current temple complex construction cost the worshippers approximately 3 lakhs (US\$10,000).

The temple is surrounded by 60 acres of sacred grove: 25 dedicated to Kiratha Ishwara and 35 acres dedicated to his wife, Bhadrakali. Much of the adjacent Devara Kadu Coffee Estate was once part of this sacred landscape. The Forest Department is currently surveying and demarcating the boundaries of these groves. Once this inventory process is finished, the DKs will be considered by the government as Reserved Forest jointly managed by the Forest Department and local residents. Until surveyed the groves are (and have always been) managed as common property resources by the priest and local community members.

People do not cut trees for fear of God. The priest explained local sanctions governing the two DKs. If people cut trees in either of the groves "some disturbance" will happen to their family, business or personal health. If the offender repents, the gods will usually forgive him, but only if he repents enough. The taboo on cutting trees in a DK is so strong that it is often compared to the sin of killing a woman or child or cow in the holy Hindu city, Benares. Even forest officers abide by the sanctions. They rarely remove fallen trees from the roadside or branches that are hanging dangerously close to electricity and telephone wires. (Perhaps they are too lazy. Whether out of sanction or sluggishness, residents currently view the government as cooperating with and being sensitive to their beliefs.) The only trees harvested from these forests are for temple repair.

Community members decided that residents may collect leaf litter for green manure, may graze livestock and may collect fallen branches and dead wood for firewood from the two DKs. People may transport these materials only by headload. Even though the nearby coffee estate has constructed several paths into the forest, transport by bullock carts is forbidden. This restriction limits the quantity of the resource that can be exploited by any one individual at any one time. Otherwise access to leaf litter and firewood would be unequal, determined by ownership of or access to a bullock cart, and would hasten resource depletion.

*A man reaps what he sows - ...
Only the absolute fool does deeds
Without thinking of the consequences.
A man who cuts down a mango grove
And waters palasha flowers instead²
Will repent his deed at harvest time.*

—The Ramayana

The Hole Iyappa Devara Kadu Temple is a pile of stones underneath a mango tree in the sacred grove of Kembatti Colony. The mango, with branches performing a sweeping arabesque into the sky, is the sacred

tree of worship for all 11 Kembatti households. As we approached the sacred site, we were asked to remove our shoes and finish the last 300 meters barefoot. The symbolic tridents and offerings of fruit were present. The Kembatti community has instituted its own set of rules and regulations. No high-caste Brahmin is allowed to enter the area. Firewood and leaf litter collection is forbidden. Eating mango fruits is allowed but only on the premises. People regularly use only one medicinal plant. The resin of *Carnarium strictum* is burned. The incense is inhaled for curing cough and cold. Resin sale is forbidden.

The DK has been reduced to half an acre from its original two. Several members complained to the local forestry officials about the encroachments by coffee planters. They followed up this verbal complaint with a written one. This latter move is considered a bold undertaking from such a low-caste community. The encroachment occurred over twenty years ago, but the Forest Department has not acted against the perpetrators.

If they could have spared the expense, the Kembattis would have fenced off the grove all those years ago to keep away grazing animals and perhaps even deterred encroachers. Today the people still worry about threats from coffee planters. Once they thought they would build a proper home for their god. Now the need to keep whatever area they can intact is a more pressing concern. "We need a place to keep our god because he gives us solace." Their next festival will commence next week with the coming of the monsoon rains. The rain will wash away the blood of the animal sacrifices and keep their temple clean.

*"...they took a raft across the dancing-waved,
tree-necklaced Yamuna³;
on its other bank was a giant cool-leaved banyan,
called Shyama.
Sita⁴ did namaste⁵ to the sacred tree:
"I bow to you great banyan!"*

—The Ramayana

The Iyappa Ishwara Devara Kadu (DK) in Kumtoor is surrounded by coffee plantations and paddy fields. The grove was once as large as 20 acres but has been reduced to twelve by coffee planters. The priest and caretaker of this grove dedicated to Bortakadu Iyappa is a non-Brahmin Coorg named K.C. Ramesh. Ramesh, who calls himself by the nickname "Jackie," inherited the caretaker position from his father. His father put up a great fight against coffee planters who encroached upon the forest and constantly filed petitions and brought up charges to the Forest Department without any success. When his father was alive the temple was free of the weeds that now wind around the lingam and surround the lingam's square stone platform.

Jackie has given up his father's fight. Given the con-

dition of the temple, he obviously neglects the sacred clearing in the woods. I asked him if other community members did not get upset with him for not fulfilling his responsibilities. He answered me without any emotion, "I have my own fields, why should I bother about it? I have no time. Everyone has lost interest in the grove. People are interested in their own agriculture." The harvest festival in December and the annual oil-lamp lighting in February no longer have their grandeur. Educated people now say that festivals are all superstition. Such talk dissuades their neighbors from donating money to perform pujas. Maybe in twenty years there will no longer be festivals. Only a crumbling shrine will remain to remind people of what once existed.

The site is open for worship to all except Harijans. Five or six headless ceramic dogs from the last festival are piled together underneath a bush. Jackie is uncertain about the future of Kumtoor's sacred grove. I challenged him by saying that if no one shows any interest in the grove there will be no incentive to protect it from coffee planters. Jackie claims that his children have shown some interest. Such an interest must be cultivated. Children need an adult to guide them and reinforce the grove's value. Before we left and slipped on our shoes, Jackie gave us a detailed list of the birds that live in the grove and the tree fruits and seeds that they are responsible for digesting and dispersing. Jackie has this knowledge that can only be learned from spending time in and observing life within the grove. Maybe he does not yet realize he could be the one to instill others with awe and respect.

The immediate surroundings of the Kiratha Ishwara DK, Kembatti colony and the Iyappa Ishwara DK reflect some elements of the environmental balance of the traditional Indian village pattern, the ecological relationship between human settlements, forests and water resources. In these locations there is a sacred grove and at the two larger DK sites there is dense woodland and forest sanctuary. The traditional ecology of the Hindu village also includes a water "tank", or reservoir of rainwater. The monsoon rains collect in these depressions, storing a permanent supply of water. The stone tank located below the two twin sacred trees at Kiratha Ishwara's temple has dried up and has not been well maintained. The stones are almost completely covered with weeds and moss. The tank is surrounded by shaded footpaths indicating the tank was once a refreshing, resting spot. Paddy fields are another ecological component. These ripening fields reflect the merger of water and land resources. They also complete the identity of the Hindu village as a self-sufficient entity, both spiritually and physically nourishing.

*Rama⁶ entered the dense forest
He saw a mandala of ashrams...
Ashrams abundant in fruits and delicious roots,
Surrounded by towering trees
Laden with luscious fruits ...*
—The Ramayana

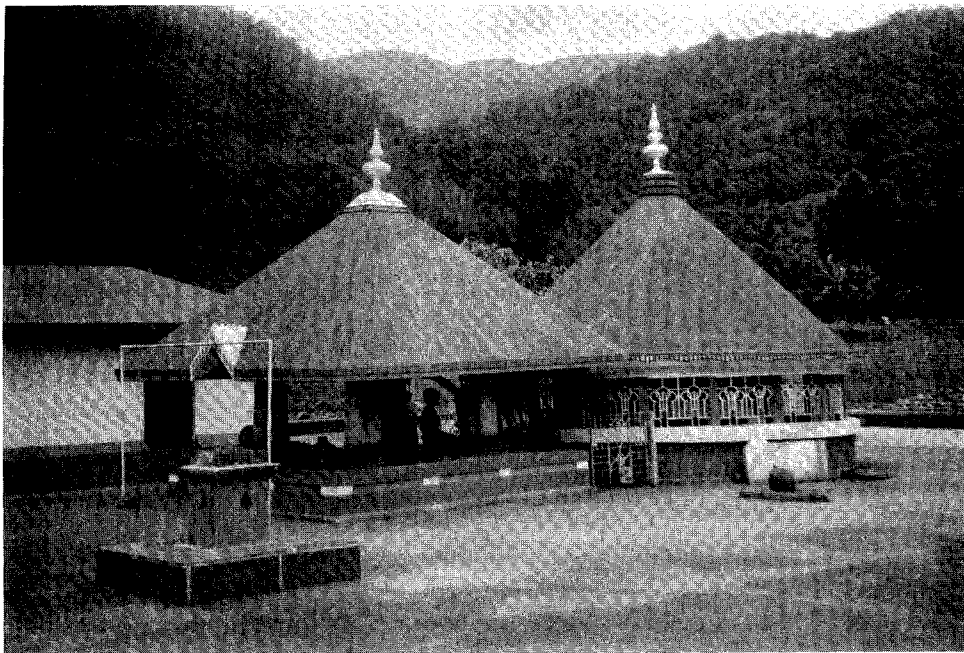
The Devara Kadu surrounding the Sri Rameshwara Temple at Irpu is one of the largest contiguous groves in southern Coorg — approximately 125 acres. Cascading behind the temple is the Lakshmana Thirtha Holy Falls. In 1892 several families decided to enhance both their karma and position in society by donating 120 acres to the god Rama. Another family donated an additional 3.5 acres in 1903. Behind the temple complex the trees extend up to the hiltops. A Brahmin family maintains the temple and performs daily pujas. The priest's family and ten other families have built small mud houses to the left of the temple at the base of a slope.

The Forest Department allows the collection of firewood, fallen branches and green lops and tops from the forest and has ignored recent encroachments. The priest earns Rs.150 per month (US\$ 5.00) plus one kilogram of rice for his family of five per day. Since this stipend is insufficient to support his family, he took over five acres of forest to plant coffee and plantains. The priest claims that Forest Department officers are friendly enough to the local Coorgs in the area, but not overly friendly to local plantation owners who have migrated from Kerala. Then again, the Coorgs are not nice to migrants either. Local people cooperate with the Forest Department to catch and arrest migrants illegally cutting trees in the grove. Coorgs who commit similar acts receive only a verbal warning.

I thought migrants might be committing "illegal" acts because they did not respect or were not aware of the local sanctions and the forest's sanctity. This is not necessarily the case. As with any set of rules and regulations, some migrants abide by them and some do not. However, the most clever individuals clear areas in the grove and then build a small temple to consecrate the spot and thereby protect themselves from eviction.

The priest complains that people do not come to Irpu to worship at the temple, but to take family snapshots in front of the waterfalls. Very few people pay for the ritual offerings. To defray the cost of supplies and temple maintenance, the priest now charges a one-rupee entrance fee (three cents) to the falls. In less than a year entrance fees have generated more than enough for annual upkeep.

Villagers near Irpu have seen evidence of deer, wild boar, wolf, tiger, panther, cheetah and bison in the grove. One person claims to have seen a python eating a small deer three years ago. A grove as large as this and undisturbed by roads has excellent potential as a wildlife refuge. It probably is. A local non-governmental organization called Unification of Coorg is fighting to maintain sacred groves as they are, and to reclaim areas that have been illegally converted into coffee and exotic-timber-species plantations. The contribution of sacred groves in sustaining Coorg's indigenous flora and fauna has no "scientific" basis. Could Coorg forest history be recreated from serious studies of large contiguous groves like



*The Irpu Sri Rameshwara
Devara Kadu Temple*

the one found in Irpu? The presence of groves in this one tiny district is a pilot study of the contribution of religious culture in the preservation of biodiversity waiting to happen. Without studies comparing the biological wealth of sacred groves, "natural" forest and perhaps Coorg's Nagarhole National Park, we will never know the groves' true ecological value.

Economic forces are chipping away at the *Devara Kadus*. Since the Indian government liberalized its economy in 1991, coffee farmers have been required to sell only 50 percent of their produce to the Indian government. The remaining 50 percent can be sold on the international market (M.G. Chandrakanth, pers. comm.). With a shortfall in production from Brazil, the price of coffee on the international market has soared, and so has land grabbing in Coorg

*Twelve-months in the darksome forest by her
true and chosen lord,
Sweet Savitri served his parents by her
thought and deed and word,
Bark of tree supplied her garments draped
upon her bosom fair,
Or the red cloth as in ashrams holy women love to wear,
Round her sylvan greenwoods blossomed
'neath a cloudless Indian sky,
Flocks of pea-fowls gorgeous plumaged
flew before her wondering eye...*

—Book V; The Mahabharata

After the setting of the sun we reached our final destination: the home of a nearly toothless, seventy-year-old Coorg coffee farmer. Bachrariyan lives in a traditional Coorg structure with a sloping tile roof and an open verandah. In his front courtyard stand two ornately-carved stone pillars. Before the advent of modern technology Coorg women would thresh rice

around these pillars. These have been retained for decoration. This visit is a courtesy call; Bachrariyan is a good friend of Nagaraja. I solicit this lifelong-Coorg resident's opinion concerning the area's sacred groves.

"Sacred groves are meant to maintain trees, animals and birds. The trees grow because their seeds are dispersed by the birds. Now, of course, all hunting is prohibited, but back then traditional hunting was prohibited only in these groves. Elsewhere we hunted wild cat and boar, monitor lizards, pygmy hog, porcupine, squirrel and deer. All animals with four legs."

He confirmed Jackie's prediction of the sacred groves' fate. "Before people feared the gods and the Forest Department. Now people take the law into their own hands. Since independence all the rules have floated away. Civilization and education are the problems. Earlier there were leaders and people followed. Now the son does not listen to the father and the wife does not listen to the husband. People work less and consume more. People drink, cut down the *Devara Kadu*, plant coffee and drink some more. The next ten years could seal the fate of our sacred groves." The future of his ancestral village, he foresees as just as bleak: anarchy, and the strong people will take over this weak government. The British government was very strong. Their policy was, "Do as I said, not according to your whims and fancies."

When asked about the role of sacred groves in educating today's youth he craned his neck towards Nagaraja and Chandrakanth and said, "The only people who do education with these sacred groves are these two. You came all the way from America, didn't you?"

Best regards,

Cynthia

Current Fellows & Their Activities

Bacete Bwogo. A Sudanese from the Shilluk tribe of southern Sudan, Bacete is a physician spending two and one-half years studying health-delivery systems in Costa Rica, Cuba, Kerala State (India) and the Bronx, U.S.A. Bacete did his undergraduate work at the University of Juba and received his M.D. from the University of Alexandria in Egypt. He served as a public-health officer in Port Sudan until 1990, when he moved to England to take advantage of scholarships at the London School of Economics and Oxford University. [THE AMERICAS]

Cheng Li. An Assistant Professor of Government at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, Cheng Li is studying the growth of technocracy and its impact on the economy of the southeastern coast of China. He began his academic life by earning a Medical Degree from Jing An Medical School in Shanghai, but then did graduate work in Asian Studies and Political Science in the United States, with an M.A. from Berkeley in 1987 and a Ph.D. from Princeton in 1992. [EAST ASIA]

Adam Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey's regional role and growing importance as an actor in the Balkans, the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Cynthia Caron. With a Masters degree in Forest Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environment, Cynthia is spending two years in South Asia as ICWA's first John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow. She is studying and writing about the impact of forest-preservation projects on the lives (and land-tenure) of indigenous peoples and local farmers who live on their fringes. Her fellowship includes stays in Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka. [SOUTH ASIA/Forest & Society]

Hisham Ahmed. Born blind in the Palestinian Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, Hisham finished his A-levels with the fifth highest score out of 13,000 students throughout Israel. He received a B.A. in political science on a scholarship from Illinois State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California in Santa Barbara. Back in East Jerusalem and still blind, Hisham plans to gather oral histories from a broad selection of Palestinians to produce a "Portrait of Palestine" at this crucial point in Middle Eastern history. [MIDEAST/N. AFRICA]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. She plans to travel and live in Namibia and Zimbabwe as well as South Africa. [sub-SAHARA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the Buenos Aires Herald from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. While with the ACLU, she also conducted a Seminar on Women in the Law at Fordham Law School in New York. [sub-SAHARA]

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ENDNOTES

1. *Saraca indica*, a small tree with red flowers. The birth of Buddha took place under this, an Ashoka tree. The bark is bitter and used as an herbal remedy for ulcers, indigestion and vaginal infections.

2. The rich orange-red flowers of the *Curcuma zedoaria* tree commonly known as the flame-of-the-forest tree.

3. One of the sacred rivers of India joining the Ganges River at Allahabad.

4. Wife of Rama. The goddess of agricultural fertility. Unearthed by her father when he was plowing a field.

5. The traditional Hindu greeting in India. It consists of pressing the palms together and raising them to one's chest or head, while simultaneously bowing one's head.

6. Hero of the Ramayana.

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