Eliza F. Kent

Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India.


This is a first of its kind book on the sacred groves of India and thus a welcome addition to the growing literature on Indic traditions and ecology. As the author notes in the introduction, in recent years, environmental NGOs, botanists, specialists in traditional medicine and anthropologists in India have shown an enormous interest in sacred groves—small forests or stands of trees associated with a temple whose produce is set aside for the exclusive use of the deity. The beliefs and practices surrounding these groves show considerable variation, as do their floral composition, their size and their embeddedness in concrete relations of property and patronage. Known by a variety of different names in south India—koyilkadu “temple-forests,” samitope “god-grove,” and devarakadu “god-forest”—they have in common the effect of having led to the conservation of pockets of abundant and diverse flora and fauna in areas otherwise denuded by rapid deforestation. With the deepening of the global ecological crisis, environmental activists have claimed the creation and protection of these sacred groves of India as an ancient indigenous ecological tradition.

One NGO, the C.P. Ramasami Aiyar Environmental Education Center (CPREEC) in Chennai, initiated a project in 1993 to restore or preserve sacred groves in South India, seeking to consciously and systematically enlist this practice in a culturally sensitive reforestation effort. Kent argues that this project entails more than just utilitarian goals. It also communicates an inspiring utopian model of society, according to which the failures of the recent past can be reversed by developing more culturally sensitive methods that draw on the best elements from the ancient indigenous past, updated for the present. CPREEC’s main technique for inspiring action to restore and replant local sacred grove sites has been to establish a correspondence between environmental degradation and the diminishing strength of people’s religious faith, particularly the taboos that formerly are said to have kept people from using forest products in sacred groves. Therefore, their public education campaigns are aimed at reawakening people’s traditional “fear and faith,” which they regard as having been eroded by modern materialism and excessive rationalism, in order to strengthen people’s commitment to care for and preserve these islands of biodiversity. Kent’s analysis of the literature produced by CPREEC’s Sacred Grove Restoration project indicates that the manner in which this NGO targets customary practices and styles of religiosity for revitalization in the service
of nature is decidedly selective. Like many other scholars and activists interested in India's sacred groves, they enthusiastically celebrate the environmental impact of the sacred groves but are ambivalent or openly critical of some of the ritual practices associated with them. Significantly, while they contribute considerable resources to the communities they work with (including plant matter, soil testing and expertise in horticulture), they do so with one condition: that the people agree to ban the practice of animal sacrifice at that site. While the thought of animal sacrifice is disturbing to many, Kent argues that the practice also constitutes one of the main distinguishing features that differentiate Brahman from non-Brahman forms of worship. Sacred groves in Tamil Nadu are generally dedicated to deities who are worshipped almost exclusively by non-Brahman castes. The CPREEC, on the other hand, is guided by the reform-minded Brahmanical values of its founder. Given this discrepancy, Kent sees the ban on animal sacrifice as an attempt to impose Brahman values on non-Brahman groups.

In other chapters, Kent shows that in Tamil Nadu, the deities who reign over the groves are those traditionally associated with the protection of boundaries. Amman goddesses like Mariamman and Kaliyamman shield villages from disease; fierce hero-gods like Karappaswami (the “dark god”) and Munniandi are often enlisted as guardian deities in the service of other gods; and Aiyannar, mounted on his horse, patrols the boundaries of the settlement, the paddy fields or the village tank. As befits their use of violence to protect the social order, these deities are all non-vegetarian deities, whose worship involves bali, the sacrifice of animals, mostly fowls and goats. When people suspect a supernatural cause for trouble in their lives, one favored method for uncovering it is a possession ritual, in which a medium enters a trance-state enabling a god to speak and act through his or her body. Often, the remedy to having offended or neglected the deity is sacrifice. The offering of a chicken or goat, or a vegetarian substitute such as a rice packet stained with red kumkum powder, may make up for the moral lapse that led to the god's displeasure. Kent argues that the different beliefs and practices—the taboos on the use of forest products, tales of divine punishment for transgression, possession rituals to ascertain the will of the divine, and sacrifices to restore harmony between humans and deities—together constitute the ideological system that limits human exploitation of the natural resources of the groves, what the staff at the CPREEC gloss as people's “fear and faith.”

In addition to oral interviews, Kent quotes from various materials, such as oral and written sthalapuranas (mythological accounts of the history of the temple) and various other publications of NGOs. I especially enjoyed learning dozens and dozens of Tamil words and comparing them to similar San-