

**Sacred Groves of Gudalur**  
**Action for Community Organization, Rehabilitation and Development (ACCORD)**  
**Gudalur, The Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu**

## **Introduction**

Since time immemorial conservation of natural resource has been an integral part of diverse cultures in different ways. Indigenous communities all over the world lived in harmony with the nature and conserved its valuable biodiversity. There were many traditional conservation practices of indigenous communities in many parts of the world, which contributed to the conservation and protection of biodiversity. A good example of such traditional practices is the conservation and protection of small forest patches called “sacred groves”. Sacred groves are patches of forest, water bodies, grasslands considered to be inhabited by deities and hence, strictly prohibited from resource extraction. Sacred groves are considered to be among the most significant forms of nature worship.

Every sacred grove carries its own legends and myths which form the integral part of the grove. Sacred groves act as an ideal centre for biodiversity conservation and have been a subject of growing importance among ecological scientists and researchers. It has been documented that several plants and animals that are threatened in the forest are still well conserved in some of the sacred groves. Further, rare, endangered, threatened and endemic species are often concentrated in the sacred groves. Sacred groves occur in many parts of India viz., Western Ghats, Central India, North East India, etc. particularly where the indigenous communities live. These are known by different names given to them by the indigenous groups.

The Gudalur valley is home to four distinct indigenous communities – Mullukurumbas, Bettakurumbas, Kattunayakans and Paniyas. For the Mullukurumbas and the Bettakurumbas, their sacred places temples located found within their village boundary excluding the forest, where they call and worship their deities. The Bettakurumbas also have temples inside the forest where annual festivals are organized. However, these temples would not be classified as sacred groves. The Kattunayakans have their deities in both sacred groves and temples. The Paniyas have sacred groves where they worship their deities.

This document seeks to present the history and status of Sacred Groves of the Paniyas and the Kattunayakans in the Gudalur Forest Division based on the study conducted by ACCORD and The Shola Trust with support from CEPF-ATREE. There is a lot of information and traditional knowledge associated with the sacred groves, and we acknowledge our limitations in being able to understand and document all of it. We have tried our best in this document to present an accurate picture of the status of sacred groves in Gudalur in the sections outlined below.

## Methodology

The information for the document has been collected through primary research carried out in Sacred Groves (sacred groves and Kaavus as called in Malayalam will be used interchangeably hereafter) of the Paniyas and the Kattunayakans in Gudalur and interviews with traditional interviews from the two communities. As part of the research, the first step was to identify the sacred groves and subsequently, carry out their GIS mapping using GPS. The first activity was done with the help of the community mobilisers from ACCORD, who are from the indigenous (hereafter referred to as adivasi) community and very familiar with the cultural geography in the region. The GIS mapping of the groves was carried out by youth from the adivasi community who were trained in the use of GPS. The coordinates of each Kaavu has been recorded and uploaded on a reliable GIS software (Quantum GIS). A framework for collecting the information on Kaavus was developed by members from The Shola Trust which included the following questions:

- 1) Name of Karnavar<sup>1</sup> and deities
- 2) Origin of the Kaavu - How did the forest patch come to be considered sacred?
- 3) Age of the Kaavu – How long has the Kaavu been in existence?
- 4) Social status of the Kaavu - Are the annual Kaavu festivals celebrated every year?
- 5) Current area of the Kaavu (in cents)
- 6) Change in area of the Kaavu - Has the Kaavu been encroached?
- 7) Legal status of land around Kaavu
- 8) Land use around Kaavu
- 9) Biodiversity in the Kaavu - Trees/Mammals/Birds/Water source

While some of these questions were based on observations, the others were directed to the Karnavar. In most cases, the Karnavar and the community mobiliser accompanied the youth volunteers to the Kaavu. We ensured that the Kaavu was not visited without the knowledge, permission and the company of the Karnavar. In some cases where the Karnavar could not accompany us, we informed them and sought their permission to carry out the mapping.

The exercise of mapping and interviews with Karnavar have been carried out almost entirely by members from the community, be it the adivasi youth or the community mobilisers themselves. We identified and mapped 226 sacred groves of the Paniyas and Kattunayakans. It is to be noted that some traditional Kaavus have been abandoned by the community for different reasons (discussed later in the document) and the Karnavar have brought/called the deities from the Kaavu to their house/village. These were not recorded in the study.

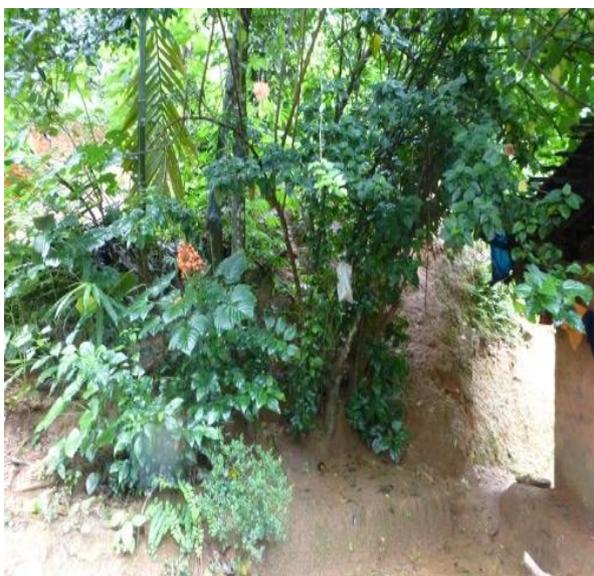
---

<sup>1</sup> Karnavar refers to the traditional elders of the community. There is atleast one Karnavar for each Kaavu. The Karnavar and his/her family are the caretakers of their Kaavu and it is their responsibility to make necessary arrangements during the annual Kaavu festival.

## Observations and Findings

Based on our experience so far, we realize that one blanket statement cannot be made about Kaavus in Gudalur. It is difficult to predict a pattern or general trend in Kaavus because every time we thought we had understood it right, we came across something that did not fit any of the patterns that have emerged so far. However, some generalizations can be made (safely too perhaps) which are being listed below. As previously acknowledged, we have also realized that we were not able to tap entirely into the vast amount of knowledge associated with Kaavus and hence, this document should not be considered as an exhaustive study. Having said that, it is the first of its kind for Sacred Groves of Gudalur and will serve as a good starting point for interested researches in future.

**Age:** Around 80% of the Kaavus we surveyed have been there for generations. It has been an interesting observation that 20% (which we think is not a small number) Kaavus were started recently (between 1-20 years) which we shall refer to as 'newer' Kaavus for future reference. What this could mean is that the process of starting Kaavus is an ongoing one and did not stop some generations ago as the word 'sacred groves' has come to typically suggest. New Kaavus are more common among the Kattunayakans.



*A new Paniya Kaavu*



*A new Kattunayakan Kaavu*

Kaavus that were started recently are not necessarily new. Sometimes when deities from an old location are called to a new location, it has not been classified as a new Kaavu.

**Origin:** The origin of most Kaavus (both Paniya and Kattunayakan) which have been there for generations is not known by the current Karnavars. Initially we thought we were not phrasing the question right but when we started finding answers for the newer Kaavus, we started to wonder if 'traditional knowledge' might be getting lost. However, we also realized that talking to one person

(Karnavar in this case) and expecting him/her to know all the answers especially those pertaining to origin and history should not be the basis of forming this assumption. We continued to explore and were able to find the origin stories of some older Kaavus.

The most common story is that one of their forefathers would get deity on him/her while going to the forest to collect fish, crabs, firewood and other produce. This person who got possessed would typically fall ill for days, and sometimes months, without his/her condition getting better or worse. This served as an indicator among elders that the person had been to a part of the forest where deities lived. They would then go and find this spot and make it into a Kaavu. Sometimes, one of their forefathers have found *swami porul* (deity things) like bell, deity-like stone, *tirushulam* in the forest. Like Kumaran from Ambalamoola says, "Those days, our people could tell from one look that a certain item belonged to their deities." In such cases, the Kaavu would be started at the spot where the *porul* was found. The first person who learnt about the presence of deity in one of these ways is called Kaavu-uthappan/Kaavu-uthamma and is also often, one of the deities worshipped in the Kaavu. The descendants of the Kaavu-uthappan usually inherit the Karnavar's position for that Kaavu.

For newer Kaavus we discovered that reasons for starting/establishing a Kaavu are manifold. In some places, the Kaavus were established when a family started experiencing some trouble (like strange and disturbing noises in the night) for which was no explanation. On more careful observation they found their deities to have entered their neighbourhood and in need of shelter. Peace was restored when a Kaavu (usually a tree) was arranged for these 'unsheltered' deities. Sometimes they have called their deities to come closer to their houses and be around at all times and have therefore, started Kaavus. On one occasion, elephant movement in and around the village gave people sleepless nights. They prayed to their deities who suggested that they start a Kaavu in the village and when that was done, things became calmer. It was not as if the elephants stopped coming; they continued to come but did not create trouble. Sometimes when families move, they usually leave their deities behind and start a new Kaavu in their new village and sometimes, which is often very rare, they take their deities with them to the new village.

A Kattunayakan Karnavar had a dream that his deities were in the forest of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve. He went looking for his deities inside MTR and when he found them, he cleared around 25 cents of forest and built a stone structure and has ever since been celebrating Kaavu pujas there. This happened 7 years ago!

**Social status:** Here we asked whether the annual Kaavu festivals are celebrated every year. For most Kaavus, the answer was positive. For the negative responses we found the most common reason to be that important people in the family/clan crucial for the puja were not been around at the time. For instance in one case where the Kaavu festival had not been celebrated for a few years

after the last Karnavar passed away, elephant problems in the village escalated. They felt that the cause was the fact that they had ignored their Kaavu. Then they started celebrating their Kaavu festival again which sorted out their problems. We asked some people if the fact that Kaavu festivals were being discontinued implied that their cultural significance was declining. We were instead told that several times in the past people have restarted their Kaavus when new issues started to come up, the cause of which they felt was the abandonment of their Kaavu.



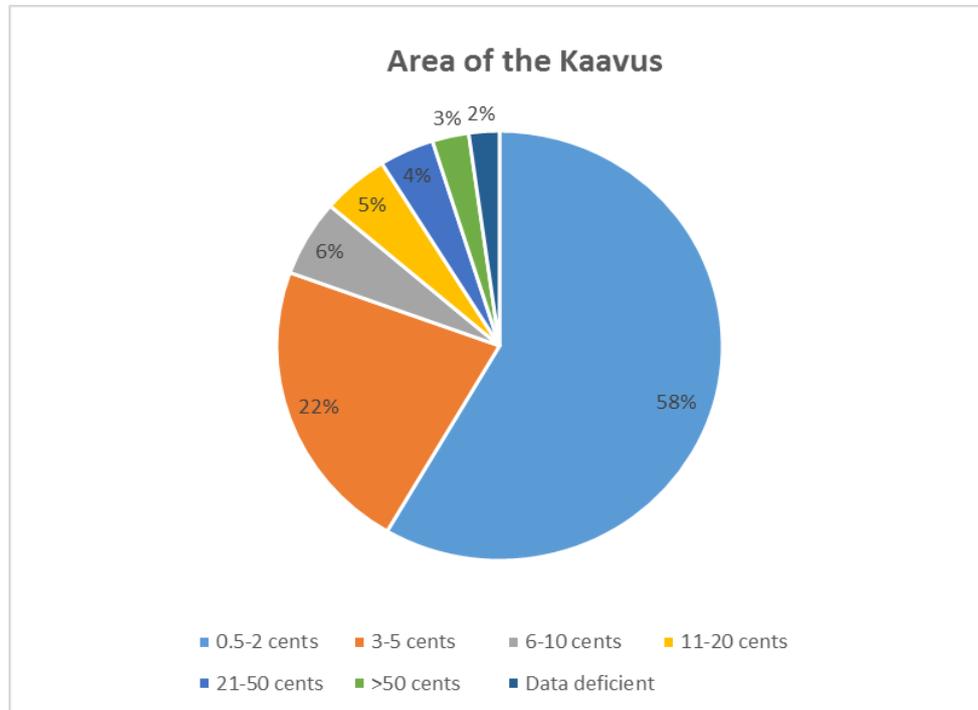
*Kaavu festival in progress in a Paniya Kaavu*

In some instances where Kaavu puja has not been celebrated, the reason, we have been told is the lack of finances for conducting the puja. For example, in the village of Pakana (Kattunayakan), the roof of the *Kovil* (temple) was damaged some years ago and for nearly 5 years, the puja was not done. Around 3 years ago, the ACCORD team working in the area got involved and arranged some funds for the roof. Since then, the village has been offering Kaavu puja every year. Sometimes it is the lack of unity among the different Karnavar. Sometimes it is the lack of space. In Kundilkadavu village, the Kaavu is now only a stone and they have not been celebrating at all. We were also told that sometimes a Kaavu has not been visited for so many years that people cannot anymore find their sacred space. This is especially true where Kaavus are inside a forest.

There are Kaavus that have been abandoned for different reasons, especially the Paniya Kaavus which used be inside forests, like Mudumalai Tiger Reserve. It became difficult to celebrate the festival inside the forest, given the escalating elephant problems according to some Paniyas. In the past, they were not as scared to be in forest along with the elephants but the elephants are not the same anymore. These Kaavus are also usually far from the village and not many people would show

up for the festival if it was organised inside the forest. However, even if the festivals are not being celebrated for such Kaavus at their original location, people call the deities of such Kaavus to their village at the time of the festival and celebrate in honour of them in their village itself.

**Area of the Kaavus:** We have seen Kaavus as big as an acre and as small as 0.5 cents<sup>2</sup>. As the graph below shows, most Kaavus have now reduced to a space of merely 0.5 to 2 cents.

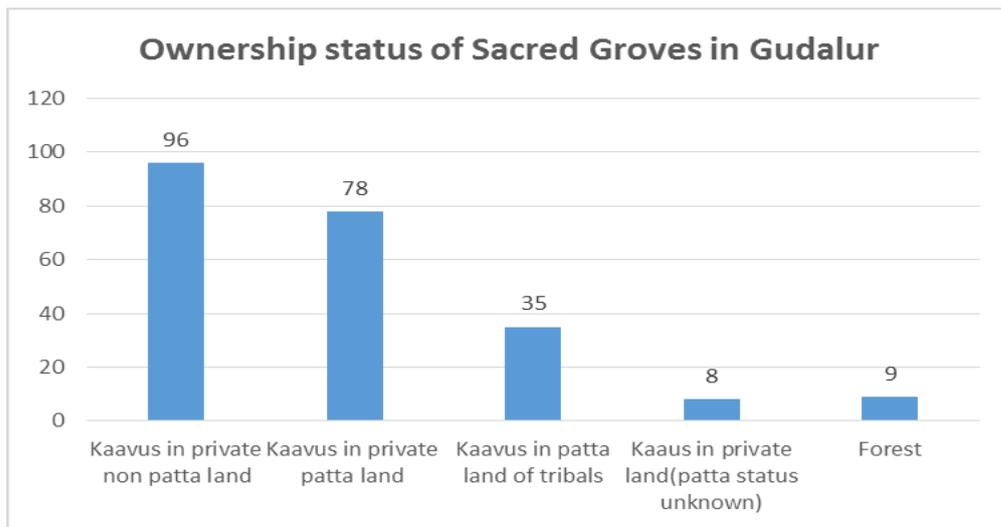


**Land use around Kaavus:** The graph below shows the ownership of land around the Kaavus. As evident from the graph, 182 of the 226 Kaavus are in private lands owned by non adivasis, for which they do or do not have official ownership, i.e. patta. For 96 of the 182, the non adivasis who were in possession of the land around the Kaavu did not have any patta. This was typical in most Section 173 land. For some Kaavus, we were not able to ascertain whether or not the non adivasis had patta for it. Then there were some that were in the land of the Karnavar or inside the forest. The newer ones are mostly in their own lands. Most Kattunayakan Kaavus are in their own land too.

Most Kaavus are in the middle of tea/banana/arecanut/coffee plantations owned by non adivasis. There are a few in big estates like Woodbriar and Parry Agro who have massively encroached upon Section 17 land and do not own any patta for it.

<sup>2</sup> 100 cents make an acre

<sup>3</sup> Section 17 land refers to one classification of land under the Gudalur Janmam Abolition Act, 1969; the status of which remains highly disputed as settlement of most Sec 17 is yet to happen.



**Encroachment of Kaavus:** The indigenous communities of Gudalur Forest Division witnessed a huge loss of their ancestral domain with the influx of immigrants from Kerala in the 1960s and Srilankan repatriates in the 1980s. As and when new settlers arrived, forests started getting converted into large tea estates and coffee plantations. Today, the Gudalur Forest Division which sits between the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and the Mukurthy National Park, is a typical 'matrix habitat' with large tea and coffee estates and considerable number of small agricultural holdings. There continues to be significant and sometimes drastic landuse changes with the expansion of industrial/intensive agriculture. Land was being encroached anywhere and everywhere and even before the adivasis could realize, their sacred groves were being taken over. Even in the face of this appropriation, sacred groves are perhaps the last strong holds which the communities have resisted encroachment upon.

We started the study with the assumption that most Kaavus had been encroached upon by non adivasis. Half way through the study, we contested this assumption. We decided to examine more carefully the opinion that most Kaavus used to be bigger in the past and have become smaller because non adivasis showed little respect for them. The understanding that was developing between us was that most Kaavus perhaps were not really big spaces ever because their area has remained unchanged (approximately 10 cents on an average). What led to this understanding was the fact that there were quite a few traditional elders who on probing did not complain about the space in the Kaavu, even if it was 5-10 cents. But we needed to see more Kaavus to establish it.

As we saw more Kaavus, we realized that our understanding of encroachment was different from how the Paniyas and Kattunayakans understood it. The concept of a boundary for the Kaavu is non-existent. Shelter for the adivasi 'deities' is in the form of a single tree or an assemblage of trees

and not necessarily a forest patch. There are some trees, sometimes a single tree, which are inhabited by deities. Everything else around these trees is the space for people to get together to sing and dance and celebrate. So essentially before tea and other plantations came into the picture, the space around the sacred trees was entirely forested, all of which was available for the people in the past. As and when plantations started, this space got lesser. However, as long as the space was enough for the get together during the puja time, people saw no reason to complain. In Kaavus, where this space according to Karnavar is enough, it is not termed 'encroached'. It was mainly when this space reduced significantly to an extent that affected the get-together that they have called it 'encroached'.

This explained why an area of 5-15 cents for a Kaavu has often not been termed encroached. There have been some instances where the area around the Kaavu is owned by the Karnavar and has been planted with tea/coffee with a small space of 5-10 cents for the Kaavu. In the village of Elamanna, the Paniyas owned land jointly with the Chettys. They sold all their share to another non adivasi except 5 cents for the Kaavu. However, in such cases, as the land is owned by the Karnavar, there are no restrictions on the use of space all around the Kaavu during the time of festivals.



*A Paniya Kaavu in the middle of a tea estate*

Encroachment is still ongoing. In Kangamoola and Panjakolly, we came across fresh tea and ginger planted immediately around the Kaavu in the last 2 years. While there were cases where the Karnavar's family was content with 5-15 cents area for their Kaavu, there were some quite angry with the non adivasis for massive encroachment of their Kaavu. In Palakolly, a woman said, 'If it were not for our *swamis*, these Chettys would have planted tea everywhere.' In Manikolly, the Kaavu has been reduced to a stone by the Chettans and Cheera, the Karnavar had to ask the Chetty whose land she worked on to provide some space for her deity. When the Chetty agreed, she called

her deity to Chetty's land and has been doing puja there. However she is not very happy about the present location and wants to reclaim her old sacred space. She got the volunteers during the mapping exercise to mark an area of 25 cents around her old Kaavu, which she is planning to fight for. The Chettys have promised to support her in her fight.



*New tea being planted around the Kaavu in Panjakolly*

In Cheenat, the Kaavu is less than half a cent now. Chathi, the Karnavar wants atleast 25 cents for this Kaavu. A Karnavar from Erumad recalled his experience of fighting with the Chettan for his right to use the Kaavu. He demanded the Chettan should at least leave 20 cents for his Kaavu. The Chettan refused. He argued that 1 cent was enough for the Kaavu and for them to come and pray. older adivasi man continued to fight with the Chettan and after a long fight, the Chettan offered him and his people 3 cents. The adivasis had no choice but to make peace with the deal for they knew that they were not powerful enough to fight the Chettan. In another village around Erumad, there used to be a Kaavu in the forest but now there was one single tree standing in the middle of coffee plantations. The non adivasi, who owned the coffee, refused to leave any land for the Kaavu. So the Kaavu had to be moved to another location. The Paniyas tried doing that but the deities did not come to the new location. And that's how they lost one of their Kaavus.

Not enough has been/could be done to protect Kaavus from severe encroachment. In some cases, the Paniyas tried talking to the non adivasis to leave more than a single tree for their deities and people. Most often, this has been ignored. We found one exception in our study. In Ambalapadi,

Kumaran and his people fought with the non adivasi who owned the land around his Kaavu and converted it from 2 cents to 35 cents. Ever since they made their Kaavu bigger, they have been trying to plant more trees in the space but with grazing common in the area, their efforts have gone down the drains. There is also a threat to the Kaavus as the land around the Kaavus changes hands among non adivasis. In Kundekani, a Nayar family owned the land around the Kaavu. They were very happy to have the Kaavu in their land and infact, supported the Karnavar's family financially during their Kaavu festival. But in 2015, they sold their land to another non adivasi and it is not in their hands to dictate what happens to the Kaavu anymore. This Kaavu occupies a space of 30 cents. An area of this extent is seen as important from an economic perspective. So it is highly likely that the new people will not allow the same area for the Kaavu. Some Karnavars voiced their concern about the complete loss of Kaavus for the next generations. In Mundakolly, the Karnavar Chandi said, "Our parents did not do enough to protect our Kaavus. We need to protect our Kaavus from any further disturbance so that they are there for our children."

We came across a few exceptions. In Verkadavu, the Chetty family had donated a small part of their land to the Kaavu. Another instance was in Karkapally where a Chetty family had received 10 cents as Kaavu mentioned in their land title - an official record of the existence of a Kaavu. Chetties, in general, seem to be very accepting and accommodative of adivasi 'deities' and Kaavus.

**Biodiversity:** In addition to understanding the cultural significance and the changing social and occupational status of sacred groves, there was also the objective to assess whether the Kaavus in Gudalur played a biodiversity conservation role, especially in modified and fragmented landscapes like Gudalur. As suggested by some studies, sacred groves contribute in maintaining some habitat heterogeneity or acting as 'stepping stones' for the movement of a range of mammals and birds. (Bhagwat, 2002). We had thought of including the validation of this theory in the scope of our study. This proved to be a challenge. Carrying out assessment in sacred groves of tree, plants, birds, odonates and amphibians was awkward. It was difficult to convince the traditional elders about the need for such assessments, without whom we would not enter the Kaavus anyway. Different aspects of biodiversity are surveyed at different times of the day and sometimes, even different seasons and to have the Karnavar accompany us on each occasion felt too much to ask of them. We also felt that we did not have the expertise to do such surveys. Having said that, we did carry out the assessment of tree and bird species in 5 Kaavus but abandoned the idea later on. What we also did was record the perceptions of the adivasis on the presence of biodiversity in and around their Kaavu. These are discussed below.

Paniya and Kattunayakan Kaavus exhibit different biodiversity patterns.

The Paniya Kaavus traditionally were in the middle of thick, dense forests. In most cases with few exceptions, a water body could be found close to the Kaavu-the combination of forests and water,

which in turn provided the habitat to several other life forms, was believed to be ideal locations for their “deities”. Paniya Kaavus which have been there for generations usually have big and old trees with reasonably good canopy cover, very often with water sources like a small pond or a thin stream. The water source is either natural or man-made but it is quite important for most Paniya Kaavus to have water for their deities.



*A Big and old tree in a Paniya Kaavu*

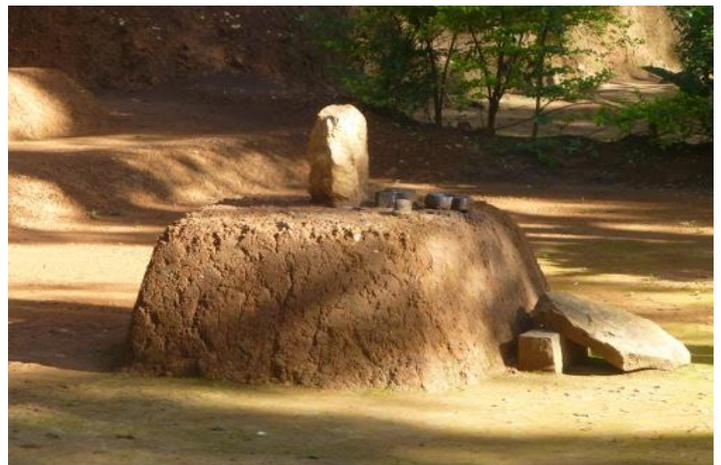


*Water source in a Paniya Kaavu*

The trees in the Kaavu should have 'milk'<sup>4</sup> because their deities like milk and should also provide proper shade to their deities. But then there were some old Kaavus which had no trees/no shrubs/no water source—simply a 'stone' in a grassland!



*A Paniya Kaavu with no trees*



*A Kattunayakan Kaavu with no tree*

In Paniya Kaavus, there are rules about no collection of firewood or other produce from the Kaavu because everything belongs to the deities. These rules are flexible sometimes. Dry firewood can be taken with deities' permission. However during the puja, everything required like firewood and

---

<sup>4</sup> Milk here refers to the white sap/latex from plants.

water is taken from the Kaavu. On these occasions, there are no taboos about cutting branches of trees inside the Kaavu for firewood.

The newer Paniya Kaavus are usually a single tree or 2-3 trees sometimes with a stone(s)-jackfruit and mango trees being the common ones and are usually located close to the Karnavar's house surrounded by his/her plantations.

Kattunayakan Kaavus do not need trees or water source necessarily. Their criterion does not seem to be the 'space' per se. They either build a small mud structure where they find their deities and then plant a tree or trees. Or they build a mud structure below an existing tree for their deities. Or there is no tree. They have different forest deities for which they have Kaavus inside the forest. We are yet to see these ones. Some older Kattunayakans told us that some of their *devams* need trees and shade but not all necessarily. Once again, only trees that have 'milk' are planted. Also for Kattunayakan Kaavus, there seem to be no rules prohibiting resource extraction. Not just the Karnavar's family but also the non adivasis can take anything they need from the Kaavu.

From an ecological perspective, sacred groves of Gudalur are the last surviving remnants of forest amidst plantations and are suggestive of the kind of vegetation that once existed. The most commonly found trees in the Kaavu include Atthi (*Ficus racemose*), Aal (*Ficus religiosa*), Chela (*Ficus drupacea*), Koli (**botanical name?**), Thani (*Terminalia bellirica*), Aini (*Artocarpus hirsutus*), Edala (*Olea dioica*), Panam (*Caryotus urens*), Manga (*Mangifera indica*), Pilavu (*Artocarpus heterophylla*), Kanaigal (*Plumeria rubra*). We have come across Kaavus with as many as 20 different tree species in a space of 35 cents. During the biodiversity assessment, the expert identified a tree species called *Syzygium travancoricum* in 2 Kaavus which has been listed as Critically Endangered by IUCN. While there is natural regeneration that happens, the Kaavu is cleared of new plants immediately before the puja so that there is enough room for people to dance and do puja. Only plants that would interfere with the puja and dance are removed. Sometimes trees are planted in the Kaavu. During the festival, the dancing and playing the drums happens around the trees in the Kaavu. In a few cases where there are no such trees but there has been space to plant new ones, people have planted trees; the most common being *Plumeria rubra* - the white beautiful flowers that the tree bears are a favourite of their deities.

Mammal movement and presence of birds has often been reported by most Karnavars. While movement of bigger mammals like elephants, deer and wild boars is not attributed only to the Kaavu, birds seem to be coming to the Kaavu for the kind of trees found there. Some Karnavars believe that Kaavus provide shade to bigger mammals. Smaller mammals like squirrels and rabbits come for the fruits. Birds also come to play and bathe in the water sources in the Kaavus.



*A barbet on a fig tree in the Cholady Kaavu*



*A mango tree planted in the Kaavu*

**Belief Systems:** This wasn't part of our framework but we came across them and think these are worth documenting. Both Paniya and Kattunayakan Kaavus can have more than one deity and all deities are distinct from each other in terms of their roles, significance and requirements.

*Narayinamma*, for example, provides strength to the Paniyas and is called when there is a health problem. Similarly, *Chorian* is called when there are skin allergies. *Ther* resides in the forests and protects the people. *Thambiratti* cannot be offered chicken. Women cannot go to Kaavus dedicated to *Kuttichattan*. And so on.

We came across some stories of faith in the Kaavu deities. In Glen Rock we were told that the stones in the Kaavu had been growing in size every year. We learnt later that in Thanjora, people believe the same.



*In Glen Rock, the Kattunayakans believe that the stones are growing in size every year.*

In Verkadavu, the Karnavar was confident that the main *swami* tree would live forever. In Cherakunnu Kaavu, the *swami* tree got struck by lightning and split into two. Overnight, the two parts merged again into the same old tree. In Kundekani Kaavu, elephants are very regular visitors and it is almost impossible to go to the Kaavu at any time other than immediately before and during the puja. During the puja too, they have had elephants come but on that day, they do not worry so much because they know that their deities will protect them. On many occasions, the deities have punished people for not showing respect. In Mundakolly, a non adivasi once cut down a tree inside the Kaavu without the Karnavar's permission. On his way back from the Kaavu, he had an accident and died. In another similar incident, a non adivasi tried to break a stone in the Kaavu to clear the space and build a house. He died on the spot too.

We had also spoken to some non adivasis who are in possession of land around the Kaavus. There were several of them who said they were happy to have the Kaavu in their land because the adivasi deities protected their land. Some of them believe that if Kaavus are not offered puja every year, bad things will happen not just to the adivasis but also to their family since the deities are in their land. In Panamoola village, the Mullukurumbas are in possession of the land. As a symbol of respect for the Paniya deities which the Madhan, the Karnavar claims helped the Mullukurumbas in their times of need, they sponsored the construction of shrines in the Kaavu.



*Donation of shrines by non adivasis as a symbol of respect for adivasi deities is also happening*

In Kaapikadu Kaavu, Anandan, the landowner mentioned how there was a lot of gold under the main Kaavu tree but that his family wouldn't touch it or else it will invite the wrath of the Kaavu deities. In Kotharvayal, the non adivasis used to attend the Kaavu puja every year until their son got possessed one day during the puja and through him, deities told them to never come again. These non adivasis had also been warned earlier by the *Vellichapad* during another puja to not take anything including firewood, even the dry ones, from the Kaavu. In Chempakatara, a non adivasi woman from the village had gone missing for many days. When the search yielded no results, the people in the village consulted the Karnavar of the Kaavu in the village to ask his deities. The

Karnavar called his deities who told the village that the woman was in a certain river. When they looked, they found her dead body in the river. That incident reinforced their faith in the adivasi deities.

We came across another interesting story. In a village near Ayyankolly, a Christian family has a Kaavu in their land. They strongly believe that the Kaavu deity is an avatar of Satan and have wanted to destroy it but the force of the Kaavu is so strong that they have not been able to do it themselves. So they called their priest for the same. Even the priest could not do anything. The Kaavu is still there and the non adivasi family believes that it is continuing to bring them bad luck and that they should get rid of it in some way.

### **Difference between Paniya and Kattunayakan Kaavus :**



*Left: Kattunayakan Kaavu next to Karnavar's house*



*Right: Kattunayakan Kaavu in a forest*

There has previously been some research done on sacred sites versus sacred groves. As per the research theories, the biggest difference between the two is that while in a grove, the whole space including the deities, trees, water source is sacred, the same is not necessarily true of a sacred site. (Arti Garg). So by not allowing resource extraction from a sacred grove, this space is preserved. In a sacred site, the deity is sacred and everything else gets preserved by virtue of the deity's sacredness. Going by our observations, most Paniya Kaavus would 'qualify' as sacred groves while almost all Kattunayakan Kaavus fall in the other category.

Most Kattunayakan Kaavus are located right next to the house of the Karnavars. Among Paniyas, this seems to be the case only when an individual family has called their deities to their house. In addition to this, all Kattunayakan Kaavus have a *kovil* (temple) next to their Kaavu which is not the case for Paniyas. Again, a Kattunayakan village can have multiple Kaavus with different Karnavars for each Kaavu while a Paniya village usually has one Karnavar for multiple Kaavus in the same village. So while Kattunayakans seem to have more individual family Kaavus, clan Kaavus are the

norm among Paniyas. Having said that, there are a few Kattunayakan Kaavus inside Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (esp. Nardi) which are sacred to a lot of Kattunayakans. However, no one goes to these Kaavus anymore. Since most Kattunayakan Kaavus are in their own land, there have not been many encroachment cases. It has mostly been the Paniya Kaavus that have suffered encroachment.

## **Conclusion**

With no formal protection whatsoever for the Sacred Groves of the Paniyas and the Kattunayakans in Gudalur, it remains to be seen how these groves will be preserved in the years to come. At the current pace of encroachment, they face the threat of complete loss and destruction. Is this fate acceptable to the community? Not really is what our study suggests. The fight to preserve them will go on. The unity among the community members is a start and has been there in many instances when issues have erupted in the past. Legal or formal backing from the government for the protection of these groves could make the case stronger. These groves are indeed the last surviving remains of the vegetation in between plantations that used to be forests before. As the realization of the economic value of every cent of land continues to grow both among adivasis and non adivasis, the future of the sacred groves is uncertain. Having said that, there is also a strong influence of the dominant Hindu religious values in the adivasi community. Photos of Hindu gods and goddesses in their houses and attending Hindu festivals is now commonplace. It is difficult to say whether the cultural values associated with the sacred groves will continue to be a strong for the future generations as they have been before. Only time will tell.