Arboreal Treasures
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Tradition

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Protecting India's sacred groves preserves both religious tradition and biodiversity

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All over india there are hallowed woods venerated by the local people who love and respect their power. The trees are held pristine and dedicated to local Deities, ancestral spirits or nature devas. These sanctuaries are protected by villagers and honored in simple rituals and traditions upheld by generations too many to remember. And in a thoroughly Indian marriage of modern and primordial, scientists have been discovering that they hold a treasure-trove of notable plants and invaluable genetic resources. Recently, a rare medicinal plant, last seen by scholars 115 years ago, was found in Arunachal Pradesh. This was no surprise to the villagers, who use the Begonia tessaricarpa to treat stomach ache and dehydration. Conservative estimates list 700 such rare plant species, some of which may hold priceless cures.

Some of India's sacred groves are protected by traditional rules which prohibit the collection of any material, be it wood, food or small plants. It is believed that transgressions will prompt a withdrawal of the presiding Deity's protective blessings and unleash natural calamities. These forests, having never been encroached upon by man, are a special find in a subcontinent that has nurtured a vast civilization for thousands of years. Most groves have less stringent rules, and serve as resource forests where people gather products for their sustenance while still honoring nature and its devas.

It is estimated that 150,000 sacred groves adorn India. Called devarkans in Karnataka, kavusands in Kerala and having many other local names, they are part of the identity and religion of those who live near them. History has it that 363 Bishnois died in 1730, fighting to protect oran trees from wood cutters near Jodhpur.

The Tamil poet Nakira asserts that Lord Murugan is found near any place surrounded by water and groves. Ayyappa, Aiyanar and Sasta are other Divine beings who come from forest havens. Village patron Deities, gramadevatas, often do not have formal temples but are worshiped at an auspicious tree or plant.

Numerous temples began as sacred tree shrines, developing traditions and a life of their own. Siva revealed His cosmic dance when saints Vyagrapada and Patanjali worshiped in a remote forest of tillai trees. Today the forest is long since gone, but the large and famous Chidambaram temple that stands in its place is still called Tillai by poets. Sacred trees may thrive for centuries. Near Puthukottai, saint Manickavasagar established the mystical Avudaiyar Temple at a sacred kuthurai tree. In this rare south-facing temple, Siva is revered in His transcendent aspect, represented by an invisible Sivalingam said to exist atop the base, or avudaiyar, which is the only visible icon in the inner sanctum. In consonance, the prasadam, or blessed food, given out after puja is merely the steam arising from a bowl of cooked rice that the priest passes among the devotees. The kuthurai tree honored by saint Manickavasagar 1,300 years ago still there.

Under British rule, the India Forest Act of 1878 accorded the groves no religious significance and curtailed people's rights to their use. Today, agriculture and population pressure are pushing back the borders of native forests and, in the villages, many of the younger generation regard notions of their priceless spiritual heritage as uncultured superstition.

The symbiotic relation between groves and indigenous peoples is the subject of an emerging science called ethnoforestry. This symbiosis--found in cultures from Equador to Indonesia to Turkey--approaches perfection in India. The challenge now is to continue protecting her sacred groves and not allow them to be exploited and destroyed for the priceless treasures that they contain.

Growing a temple: A sanctified thread is tied around the tree, marking it as sacred. Here simple aratis are performed by villagers. Bells rung by the wind sing along with the rustling of leaves.