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Floristic Diversity, Conservation Status and Economic Value of Miniature Sacred Groves in Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu, Southern Peninsular India

Selvamony SUKUMARAN<sup>1</sup>, Solomon JEEVA<sup>2</sup>, Appavoo Deva Sobhana RAJ<sup>1</sup>, Doraipandian KANNAN<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Centre in Botany, Scott Christian College, Nagercoil 629 003,  
Tamil Nadu - INDIA

<sup>2</sup>Ecology Laboratory, Centre for Advanced Studies in Botany, School of Life Sciences, North-Eastern Hill University,  
Shillong 793 022, Meghalaya - INDIA

<sup>3</sup>Centre for Environmental Studies, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham University,  
Ettimadai, Coimbatore- 641105, Tamil Nadu - INDIA

 [Keywords](#)  
[Authors](#)



[bot@tubitak.gov.tr](mailto:bot@tubitak.gov.tr)

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**Abstract:** The plant diversity of southern peninsular India has recently been reduced to a great extent due to anthropogenic disturbance and environmental degradation. Disturbance was the major factor responsible for fragmentation of forest vegetation; as a result of this, there is a preponderance of small patches, some of them still preserved as sacred groves because of strong religious beliefs held by the indigenous people of this region. It is thought that one of the prime utilities of sacred groves is the protection and occasional supply of medicinal plants on a sustainable basis. Most of the medicinal plants were confined to these groves only. During the study period we inventoried 201 miniature sacred groves covering an area of 13.1 ha. Among these, 10 sacred forests are present in Agastheeswaram, 11 in Thovalai, 72 in Kalkulam, and 108 in Vilavancode taluk. The floristic richness of the sacred groves in Kanyakumari district was analysed. A total of 329 species belonging to 251 genera of 100 families were enumerated from the miniature sacred forests of Kanyakumari district. Of these, 42 species were endemic, 40 very rare, 47 rare, and 16 endangered. Since there is minimal exploitation of these groves, they are considered a home to certain rare, endangered, and endemic plants and are rich in biodiversity. These sacred groves are closely related to the social and cultural life of a people and a number of cultural rites and religious rituals have perpetuated the status of a sacred grove, which has ensured the protection of the sacred grove vegetation in pristine condition.

**Key Words:** Medicinal plants, plant diversity, religious beliefs, sacred grove, Tamil Nadu, vegetation profile

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