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Religion, Institutions, Ecology, and Economic Growth: A Study of Sacred Groves (Kāvu) in Kerala

Dr. Radha Kumar
Associate Professor and Head of the Department
Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology
St. Xavier's College (Empowered Autonomous Institute), Mumbai
Email- radha.kumar@xaviers.edu
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Abstract
This paper investigates the connection between religious beliefs, institutions, and economic growth, with a particular focus on how religious practices influence ecological sustainability. It analyses the main aspects of religion, including its conceptual, performative, and institutional dimensions, and situates them within larger philosophical and sociological frameworks. An additional focus is on how religion provides support for its core values and how this, in turn, affects its economic influence.
Drawing on classical and modern interpretations of religion, the study highlights how faith traditions shape ethical systems, social cohesion, and economic behaviour. In my paper, I have focused on the traditional institution of Kāvu (sacred groves) in Kerala, India, as a case study demonstrating the integration of religion, ecology, and economic life. Based on fieldwork conducted in the Kurumali Kāvu region of Thrissur district, the research illustrates how religious beliefs and practices contribute to environmental conservation, social unity, and localised economic systems. The findings suggest that religion, far from being merely a spiritual or symbolic system, plays a critical role in sustaining ecological balance and fostering economic resilience.
Keywords*: Religion, Ecology, Economic Growth, Sacred Groves, Kāvu, Kerala, Social Institutions, Sustainability*

Introduction

The Facets of Understanding Religion and Its Influences, specifically in the Economic Parameters

Religion has historically played a key role in shaping human societies by influencing moral values, social structures, and economic systems. The relationship between religion and economic growth is complex and multi-dimensional, encompassing not only material production and exchange but also ethical principles, institutional frameworks, and ecological awareness. This paper aims to explore this connection by first analysing the fundamental aspects of religion and then examining its practical impact through a case study of Kāvu traditions in Kerala, illustrating how the Kavu itself becomes a vibrant space for protecting the ecosystem and supporting trade and commerce.

Religion has been studied and defined from many perspectives across different disciplines. Galloway describes religion as "man's faith in a power beyond himself, whereby he seeks to satisfy emotional needs, gain stability in life, and express himself in acts of worship and service" (George 1940: 184). Similarly, Martineau defines religion as "a belief in an Ever-living God, a divine Mind and will, governing the universe and maintaining moral relations with mankind." (James 1926: 1) This definition highlights the emotional and ethical aspects inherent in religious practice.

When examining the role of religion in the space and its impact on economic factors, it is crucial to understand how it influences different aspects of life. Religion also stresses that faith helps individuals overcome insecurities and anxieties, underscoring its psychological importance. In all its forms, religion offers emotional stability, purpose, and meaning. It is not just a belief system

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but also a lived experience involving rituals, practices, and community involvement.

Religion also has a mental component. Even in its simplest forms, it involves taboos, rituals, and symbolic acts. As religious traditions grow, these elements become more structured, including prayers, chants, and moral codes. Acts of charity and compassion become vital parts of society, reflecting its moral values. In this way, religion functions as a unifying social force. It fosters social cohesion, offers comfort during challenging times, and supports social institutions. It provides a framework for understanding suffering and human existence. Religion isn't just escapism; it often offers a rationale for social order and stability.

Furthermore, from an institutional perspective, religion organises communities through structured systems of leadership, rituals, and doctrines. It sets norms that influence behaviour and social interactions. They often play important roles in education, healthcare, and social welfare, thus contributing to societal development. All of these observations were firsthand experiences during my study of the Kurumali Kavu in Kerala. It served as a platform where various ideologies and streams blended for the overall betterment of the social ethos.

The differences among religion, theology, and philosophy are also significant. Religion is a system of lived experiences marked by devotion and commitment. Theology involves higher-level thinking, including the analysis and defense of religious beliefs. Philosophy of religion, on the other hand, studies religious ideas through an objective, critical perspective. A core part of religion is the idea of the sacred or holy. This idea goes beyond normal human experience and is often seen as impossible to describe. Religious traditions across cultures share a basic sense of the sacred, setting religion apart from fields like science or philosophy.

Furthermore, religious life involves the emotional and intuitive parts of human experience. Feelings such as awe, guilt, happiness, and a sense of belonging are essential to religious practice. Rituals, myths, and symbols help individuals connect with the divine and deepen their understanding of life. Religion also addresses fundamental questions about the origin of life, the nature of the universe, and the possibility of life after death. These questions are beyond scientific proof but remain central to human curiosity.

To surmise, Religions share several common characteristics, such as

1. *Belief in the Supernatural*: Most religions include belief in a higher power or ultimate reality.
2. *Distinction Between Sacred and Profane:* Religious systems differentiate between holy and ordinary aspects of life.
3. *Ritual Practices***:** Rituals mark significant life events and reinforce communal identity.
4. *Moral Codes***:** Ethical principles guide individual and collective behaviour.
5. *Sacred Narratives:* Myths and stories provide a coherent worldview.
6. *Social Organisation:* Institutions maintain religious traditions and practices.
7. *Promise of Salvation:* Religions offer hope for transcendence and fulfilment beyond material existence.

An Enquiry into How Religion Influences Economy?

These features demonstrate that religion functions as a comprehensive system that influences all aspects of human life. However, can there be an equation between Religion and Economic Life?

Studying the parameters of Ancient Indian thought reveals that religion significantly influences economic behaviour by shaping core values such as honesty, discipline, and social responsibility. A key aspect is that the Indian concept of Artha prioritises economic prosperity among the four Purusharthas (life's goals). Nonetheless, economic pursuits are balanced with ethical and spiritual considerations. Economic systems fundamentally rely on the processes of production, distribution, consumption, and exchange. Religion greatly influences these processes by encouraging sustainable practices and fair resource sharing. Additionally, it fosters community cooperation and trust, which are essential for economic growth. This discipline and approach support the development of trade and commerce. To boost

trade activities, establishing trade routes, whether land-based or maritime, is vital. The resources accessed are inherently connected to the land and the broader ecosystem, thereby merging religious principles with ecological concerns. This connection is especially prominent in Indian cultural traditions. Ancient scriptures emphasise the sacredness of nature and the importance of environmental preservation. The Bhumi Sukta from the Atharva Veda venerates the earth and its resources, demonstrating a deep ecological awareness.

Literary and archaeological evidence further supports this connection. Classical texts and artistic representations depict nature as essential to human life. Historical administrations also recognised the importance of preservation.

The Kāvu Tradition in Kerala: A link between religion and trade

The Kāvu tradition in Kerala exemplifies the integration of religion, ecology, and economic life. Kāvus are sacred groves dedicated to deities, often associated with serpent worship and local goddess traditions. These groves are protected spaces where ecological preservation is maintained through religious belief. The kavu, or shrine, got its name from local legends and origin myths of the goddesses. Most of the kavus in the original stretch of Bharathappūzha are under the control of the communities that venerate the land's essence and fertility. They are the patron moolar (hereditary trustees), and the kavus are the basic element of Nayar domination (Hashik 2012: 227).

Kāvus, are typically found or created near water sources, enhancing their ecological and economic value. They support biodiversity and help increase agricultural productivity. Protecting these areas from disturbance promotes environmental sustainability. The connection between Kāvu and religion is natural and profound. Kāvu as Sustainable Resources. The classic definition of a kāvu (sacred grove) is a traditionally protected patch of forest, especially common in regions like Kerala.

It is observed and documented that religious beliefs supporting these groves are often linked to serpent worship and local deities, helping preserve the ecosystems for centuries. The Puranic philosophy of Devi, in which she is associated with tribal worship of the Mother Goddess, is also linked to the kavu, as this is prakruti, or nature, and nature is celebrated. Besides their spiritual importance, kāvus serve as effective examples of sustainability. The fertile land and diverse plant life enhance biodiversity conservation. They also contribute to better water resource management.

This is because most kāvus consist of ponds, streams, or wetlands, which facilitate groundwater recharge, retain soil moisture, and mitigate drought in neighbouring areas. They operate as natural water reservoirs, thereby supporting agricultural practices and local ecosystems. The banks of the sacred rivers are considered the abode of the gods and goddesses (Hashik 2012: 199). Moreover, they contribute to climate regulation, as their dense foliage helps absorb carbon dioxide, regulate local temperatures, and improve air quality. Further, the thick vegetation cover prevents Soil erosion, and fallen leaves maintain and enhance soil fertility by creating organic matter and enriching the soil naturally without chemical inputs.

Kāvus are protected not by law alone, but by belief systems and traditions. Rituals and taboos discourage exploitation, creating a sustainable relationship between humans and nature. This is an example of indigenous ecological knowledge. There is an energy collection without depletion. Kavus also provides Ecological sensitivity, as they support the enhancement of water sources, thereby increasing their ecological and economic value. They support biodiversity and help increase agricultural productivity. Protecting these areas from disturbance promotes environmental sustainability. The link between Kāvu and religion is natural and profound. Kāvu as Sustainable Resources

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Religious beliefs uphold these groves, often linked to serpent worship and local deities, helping to preserve them for centuries. The Puranic philosophy of Devi, in which she is associated with the tribal worship of the Mother Goddess. Besides their spiritual importance, kāvus serve as

effective examples of sustainability. The fertile land and diverse plant life enhance biodiversity conservation. They also contribute to better water resource management.

My fieldwork findings reveal several key aspects:

1. Social Integration:

The Kāvu functions as a unifying space that transcends caste, class, and gender boundaries—I observed different communities coming together to participate in the discussion. Women have historically been seen as key symbols of fertility. Fertility rituals and agriculture are closely associated with the Mother Goddess, which brings us to the main focus of this discussion: resource sharing, particularly land and grain. There was a strong sense of resource sharing among the PĀRAIYAN AND EZHĀVA families and the KAKANĀT families. Their devotion is genuine, pure, and sincere. The Parāiyan of Kerala was an agricultural community known for making drums for various events. They also engaged in animal husbandry. Furthermore, the members of the MULĀKKAL PARIYĀN community, descendants of the KAKANĀT families, and local residents all played significant roles in preserving the core traditions of the Kāvu and its practices.

Also, the role of ancestor worship in the form of stones is considered very important. In my fieldwork, I observed the same. The implication is that the continuity of thought and traditional knowledge persisted. Importance was given to the ancestors who preserved the essence of the land and its environs. This was also part of the Pitr Yajña, where prayers were offered to the ancestors. There is undoubtedly a strong presence of a shared history passed down orally from one generation to another.

The role of the *Velichāppadu*, who is the māntra vādi and a mystic, is another association in which one can see the presence of mystic practices. To sustain the narrative of the Devi, who is the caretaker and protector of the environment, the Velichappadu serves as a medium of communication between the Devi and members of society. The spirit of the Devi transcends into him, and he gives various oracles. I also witnessed the roles and importance of the Namboodri and Nair families, who were stakeholders in the land. They were involved in agricultural activities and local economic exchange.

2. Ecological Awareness:

Community members actively protect the environment, recognising its sacred value. The entire community, called a pradesam, work together to maintain this ecosystem through active participation. There is an active worship of Naga. In the Kavu, a naga stone sculpture is placed on a pedestal, and the entire area is fully protected. The worship of the naga in our ancient civilisation has always been associated with fertility cults and rituals. The Naga, situated on the stone adhisthāna beneath the verdant canopy, functions as a silent yet profound protector of the ecosystem. Elevated upon a pedestal amidst the green surroundings, the sārpa exudes a composed, reassuring presence, comparable to the Kshetrādhipati, who oversees and safeguards the entire area. The Naga's poignant, tranquil demeanour has rendered the sārpa an essential element of the Kāvu. It diligently guards the verdant landscape, ensuring that no grass blade or leaf is harvested. The veneration of animals in this region is equally important, as none may be harmed. The relationship with the Kāvu is both tangible and emotional, as it sustains all forms of life and underscores the importance of living harmoniously with animals and preserving biological diversity. Our entire existence is structured to uphold this principle.

Further, the sārpa, as a central figure within the kāvu, embodies a historical narrative, as nāgas are deeply embedded in our cultural heritage, as evidenced by archaeological and literary sources. Nonetheless, the Naga's presence in the Kavu appears as a living entity—silent and stoic. Although they do not occupy prominent positions on large pedestals, their presence remains poignant and sacred, akin to that of guardians. It is widely believed that even a single leaf plucked from the kavu can result in a curse, as the Sarpa is believed to punish transgressors.

To comprehend this veneration of the sārpa in the kavu and understand its impact on people's psyche, one has to study the context in which it emerged.

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The references from literary and archaeological sources are intertwined with mythology, historical events, geography, local customs, and traditions. The sacred grove is also a platform to celebrate local culture. "Culture is the human response to the local environmental conditions. This nature, man spirit combination is important. In this space, the spirit plays an important role in maintaining the balance." (Hasnain 1988: 217) In this journey, acknowledging the impact of animals on daily life is key.

In cultural and social settings, festivals like Nāgpanchami and Gōvardhan poōja are classic examples of poōjas performed by members of society to acknowledge the help animals render in keeping the wheels of life moving.

3. Economic Significance:

The proximity to the Kurumali River supports trade and agricultural activities. The Kavu, in fact, safeguards the Kurumali River. The presence of the Devi temple near the river is also a typical sign of how the water system is protected. This river is a major tributary of the Karuvannur River, which flows through Thrissur. The river originates in the Western Ghats within the Chimmini wildlife sanctuary. This river was also called Nandiyar because many Shiva temples were built along its banks. Further, this river has two tributaries: Chimony and Muply. The Kurumali joins the Manali River at Arattupuzha, after which it is known as the Karuvannur River. The Kavu then becomes the caretaker of this entire biodiversity, and the Devi here herself is called Kurumali Amman. The presence of this rich foliage also aids in climate regulation and enhances soil fertility, thereby benefiting agriculture.

4. Cultural Continuity:

Rituals and festivals strengthen community identity and help preserve traditions. I witnessed the Khumba Bharani celebrations, where entire villages nearby, along with land stakeholders, came to participate. There were mystical practices where women entered a trance and began to sway to the beat of the drums. Various members from the nearby kshetrams join to celebrate the essence and the importance of the land. Also, it enhances local crafts and traditions. Vendors come to sell their wares.

5. Spiritual Connection:

The presence of the deity, the Goddess, who represents nature and the natural surroundings, or Mother Earth, fosters a sense of belonging and purpose. She becomes the essence of the land and its fertility. Bhagavati (The Goddess) is the predominant Hindu Deity in Kerala (Kurup 1977:24). Bhagavathi, in the Kāvus, is a *ugra-svārupini.* She is also called *Parashakti*. The locals also believe that she is the sister of the goddess of the Kodungāllur Bhagavathi temple. The *Dāru vigrāham* is significant because of the ecosystem's importance to our survival.

The keepers of the Devi's secret are the *Velchapāddu,* who serve as her spokespersons. Through them, the Devi delivers her oracles, and they are widely venerated in the village. The practices of the *Velachappādu* appear to be mystical. They are regarded as mediators between subordinate deities such as Rakshās, Dambāti, Brahma Rakshās, and Pattaliswāmi.

To appease the Devi, a Pooja called Gurūthi was performed. In this Gurūthi Pooja, a rooster's blood is offered to ward off evil influences. It is believed that during this ritual, all the bādhas and dōshas are eliminated. The gūruthi offerings are mainly associated with agricultural communities, where the Pooja is performed to seek Bhagvāthy's blessings for the protection of the land and the harvest.

Also, this pooja was performed to protect the community from evil influences and spirits, where blood is offered as a symbol of vitality. Blood in this context signifies life. It serves as a metaphor for the rejuvenation of land and its surroundings. It is believed that when it spills onto the land, it nourishes the soil. This Pooja also exorcises evil spirits. A mixture of lime and turmeric, which resembles blood, is used. The Pooja is also conducted to seek relief from mental sickness and to instill positive energy. It also helps maintain good health. The rituals here are largely shamanic.

The Khumba Bharani festival exemplifies the cultural and religious significance of the Kāvu. It brings together communities from multiple villages, reinforcing social bonds and collective identity. It also boosts cultural tourism as members from different kshetras dress in their

traditional attire. I was able to witness the celebration first-hand with members of the community participating in full gear.

Religion is a complex phenomenon involving emotional, cognitive, and social aspects. It has a significant influence on human behaviour and societal organisation. The Kāvu tradition in Kerala demonstrates how religious beliefs and institutions can support ecological conservation and economic development. By fostering a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, religion offers a sustainable model for development. Future research should explore similar traditions across cultures to better understand the broader implications of religion in economic and environmental contexts.

To conclude Kāvus demonstrates how religion, culture, and ecology can work together to create sustainable systems. They are not just sacred spaces but self-sustaining ecological units that support biodiversity, water conservation, and climate balance. In modern environmental discourse, kāvus can be seen as early models of community-based conservation and sustainable resource management.

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