



# **SNAKE WORSHIP IN KERALA: LEGACY, HISTORY AND CULTURE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Many parts of the world venerate snakes, depending on the region's culture and traditions. Worship of snakes is a fundamental aspect of Indian ritual and culture, and it is included in Hinduism. The practice of serpent worship has a long history in Kerala. The serpent groves in Kerala are looked for and protected by numerous Hindu households. To ensure that the flora and fauna are not disturbed or destroyed, each grove has a protector family that holds occasional poojas and light lamps. The study investigates the ceremonial practises of snake worship in Kerala, including rituals, legends, history, and environmental relevance. Perhaps no other state in India has a connection between snake worship and daily life like Kerala does.*

**Key Words:** Snake temples, serpent groves, Pampumekkattu Mana, Vetticode Temple

In Kerala, the practice of snake worship is deeply ingrained in daily life and forms a part of the state's rich cultural legacy. Snakes are still highly venerated and worshipped in this state, both inside and outside of the sacred woods. The unique rituals, practises, and taboos still associated with snakes, the mystery surrounding the treatment of snake bite victims, the stillness within the deep shade of the groves, the feeling of wilderness provided by the forest-like vegetation, the fascinating folklore associated with the "kavus" and snake worship, and the unique rituals, practises, and taboos still associated with snakes are all a part of the rich culture of the land. The serpent groves in Kerala offer a sense of some primordial forces.

## **Objectives of the study**

1. To analyze the history of snake worship in Kerala;
2. To focus on the cultural ethos, and rituals associated with snake worship;
3. To explain the folk arts concerned with snake worship;
4. To show instances of the three major snake worshipping temples in Kerala, their rituals and mode of worship;
5. To analyse the ecological and environmental significances related to snake worship.

## 1. History of Snake Worship in Kerala

The tradition of Kerala has a long history of serpent worship. Many Hindu households look after and guard the serpent groves in Kerala. Every grove has a protector family who performs infrequent pujas and lights lamps to guarantee that the kavu's flora and animals are not disturbed or destroyed. Cutting down trees and killing snakes in a sarppakavu are considered sins that trigger the serpents' curse. Sarppakavus in Kerala is rich in exotic flora and fauna, especially medicinal plants (Devika 2020).

Kerala in the past was unwelcoming due to the abundance of snakes. Parasurama persuaded people to worship snakes to escape the snakes' curse. Each household possessed acres of land back then when the state was less populous. Each family was expected to set aside a specific area of their property for the snakes, usually one or two acres. There will be a modest shrine with one or more snake idols in each groove. Snakes were able to freely travel throughout the territory designated for them because people hardly ever went into these grooves. The ecosystem of the grove benefited from the absence of human interference. Nobody removed the trees, bushes, and vines that were encroaching into the groove. At the shrine, a few people will occasionally pray. Lighting an oil lamp in front of the statues in the evening is another custom. The south-west corner (Kanni Moola) of the property is where the snake grooves are typically found. Vastusashtra prohibits the placement of toilets or garbage bins in this spot even if no snake grooves are ever constructed there. Nagas have also discovered a position of significance in Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and other local and regional cults in addition to Hinduism (Manjusha, 2016).

## 2. Cultural Ethos

Naga worship is one of the oldest and most widespread forms of religious practice prevails in the country. It is closely interwoven with the life of the people of the State and is a component of its rich cultural heritage. Underlying cultural and religious beliefs in serpent deities have played a role in protecting iconic animals such as snakes and other species (Jain, 2020). Visitors were less likely to harm snakes inside the groves than outside. Fear also plays a prominent role. Harming snakes is a sin. There may be about 2,000 sacred groves in Kerala and serpents form the main deity in at least half of them. Vetticode Mannaarssala and Pampumekkattu Mana are sacred groves in Kerala famous for snake worship. The worship of snakes was thought to bring wealth to the family. The benefits of serpents are often prayed for by infertile women.

## 3. Rituals

The sacred groves in Kerala function or at least functioned till recently as cultural centres of the village folk. The rich and diverse traditions, rituals and lore of the people of Kerala only reflect the richness of the natural surroundings (Envis, 2022). The rituals offered at Kavus vary from place to place, according to the type of important deity presiding over the grove. According to folklore, serpents are among the most powerful and highly benevolent divine spirits. A few Namboothiri families, as in the case of Mannaarssala and Pampumekkattu, are the chosen priests for these serpent Gods and Goddesses. In Kerala, serpents are also revered as fertility deities, and childless couples will frequently execute certain rites to bless the serpent gods

with a child. Farmers pray to them for a healthy harvest and rain, do offerings, and present sacrifices since they are revered as soil gods.

#### **4. Prominent Snake temples in Kerala**

##### **Vetticode Aadimoolam Sree Nagaraja Temple**

The temple was built as a gratitude to Anantha, the snake god, who asked to suck out the unwanted elements in Kerala to turn it into fertile land for the residents. The temple is located on a six-acre land with a sacred grove which has Nagaraja and Nagayakshi as principal deities (Balasubramanian, 2017 ). Vetticode temple is believed to be one of the first two snake temples envisaged by Lord Parasurama. It is believed that the idol for the temple was made by Mayasura, the asura architect; the consecration of the temple of Vetticode was also blessed by the presence of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Since the land for the temple was founded by Lord Parasuram using his axe, it later came to be known as Vetticode, which translates into heaped land, and since it was the first serpent temple of Kerala. There are two ponds near the temple from which Lord Parasuram is believed to have heaped the soil; the rare species of medicinal plants surrounding the ponds impart a medicinal quality to its water. It is widely held that taking a bath in these ponds can be helpful for many skin diseases.

##### **Mannarasala Sree Nagaraja Temple**

Mannarasala Sree Nagaraja temple is located at Harippad in the southeast district of Alappuzha, Kerala. It is surrounded by lush green sarppakavus which are home to many exotic species of medicinal plants and reptiles. The kavus (groves), as well as the temple, are also host to many serpent idols ( Devika, 2020). Unlike most of the temples in Kerala that give importance to male priests, the Mannarasala temple has a centuries-old unique system of worship in which the eldest female member of Mannarasala Illam becomes the chief priestess; the priestess is succeeded by the second eldest female member of the family. The high priestess is called amma (mother); when a woman is appointed as the next amma, she takes a vow of celibacy and adopts an ascetic lifestyle for the rest of her life.

##### **Pambumekattumana Illam**

Pambumekattatu Mana was once known only as Mekkattu Mana in The Thrissur district of Kerala's is well-known for its serpent worship. The Nampoothiri (male head) of the illam (Brahmin household), who allegedly lived in abject poverty years ago, reportedly travelled to the Thiruvanchikulam temple in the Ernakulam district to perform penance. The lord Nagaraja Anantha gave the Naampoothiri the nagamanikya(a powerful magical stone ) because he was touched by his dedication. The ancient Naga Temple is renowned for its history and the myth that there is a five-headed snake inside the temple. According to legend, "Nagayakshi" and "Vasuki," two deities, are present on the Kizhakkini (east) side of Pambumekattatu Mana. The Pambumekattatu Temple, which is situated on six acres of ground, has five sacred groves. The Pambumekattatu temple is well known for its Rahu pooja. The oil and ash from the lamp at Pambumekattatu Mana are seen as auspicious and distributed as prasada (a devotional offering made

to a god) to devotees, same as the kedavilakku (an eternal lamp, one that is kept lit forever) at the Vetticode temple. They are also thought to be treatments for skin conditions like psoriasis.

## 5. Significance of Snake Worship

The role of religious sentiments in the conservation of sacred groves around the globe is particularly emphasized in the field of Religion and Ecology. In Kerala, from time immemorial, the concept of conservation and nature has been carefully woven into various religious beliefs and customs. serpent groves are a prime example of this approach.

The traditional practice of every village having a temple, a tank, and a related sacred grove explains the traditional practice of gathering and distributing water and might be viewed as the foundation of the community's economy. People were not allowed to cut down trees, and even removing a twig was frowned upon (ENVIS). People were not allowed to cut down trees, and it was considered improper to even take a twig. Sacred groves are home to numerous rare, endemic, and endangered species as well as economically significant trees with fruit-bearing and medicinal properties. The responsibility for protecting soil, water, and ecological diversity falls to sacred forests that are close to populated areas (Panicker)..

The loss of the joint family system, grazing, human intrusions, disbelief in religious ceremonies and taboos, and changes in the socio-economic environment poses a serious threat to Kerala's sacred groves. Every living thing in the ecosystem was valued in India's eco-centric heritage, which also acknowledged the complex relationships between living and nonliving things that permit the free flow of matter and energy. Existing sacred trees' preservation would contribute to the local inhabitants' security of livelihood and ecological sustainability. Above importantly, no one in Kerala can simply ignore the cult of the serpent as a cultural and ecological emblem.

According to Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, "Sacred Groves are one method of expressing the gratitude of human families to the trees that sustain and support life under a given agro-ecological condition, unlike a botanical garden, where a wide range of trees and plants are collected and cultivated for education and enjoyment."

According to a report by the State Assembly Committee on Forest and Environment, the state had more than 10,000 groves when it was created in 1956, but today there are only around 1,200 of them left, and many of them are endangered. (Suchitra,2015). "The snake temples used to be a sign of divinity and sanctity, and one could only visit its grounds with the highest reverence." Even the thought of cutting the trees made people hesitant. However, with the phrase "sarpakaavu" (snake temple) being reduced to merely social jargon, the situation has nearly entirely altered. The virtues of biodiversity and conservation have been undermined by the aggravating need for additional land to accommodate the expanding population and the complacent outlook of today's generation (Jain, 2020). A recent report presented to the state Assembly claims that the excessive development and human activities are dooming Kerala's sacred woods. Over the past 60 years, the number of groves in Kerala has dramatically decreased.

The preservation of biological diversity is intertwined with the protection of the environment and life support systems. Sacred groves serve as a symbol for this comprehensive idea and practise of the traditional Indian method of preserving in situ genetic diversity. It is advisable to ignore the sacred groves' environmental importance as an ecosystem. They help to preserve the area's great biological diversity in addition to conserving soil and water. Water is always available in the ponds and streams that border the woods. For many animals and birds that need water, especially during the summer, these are their last options. Because of the rich content of their litter, sacred groves also

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