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Sacred Trees in Hindu Temples of Theni District, Tamil Nadu: A Perspective of Ethnomedicinal uses and Conservation Study

Santhoshkumar Muthu [1], Sivasankar Murugesh [1], Aravindhan Veerasamy [2,*]

[1] Department of Biochemistry, Kongunadu Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Coimbatore-641029, Tamil Nadu, India

[2] Department of Botany, Kongunadu Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Coimbatore-641029, Tamil Nadu, India

*Corresponding author Email: av.aravind2001@gmail.com

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Abstract: Tamil Nadu reflects the rich heritage of Hindu temples and historical sites with a long legacy. People worship and revere trees in every temple with most devotion. The Reverence to the trees in temples is practiced across the world and is well established from pre-historic periods in India (Bharat). Sthala-vriksha (Sacred Tree) is the tree which is significant and unique in most of the temples in India. In the present study, ethnomedicinal survey of sacred trees was carried out in the Theni District of Tamil Nadu with the support of a standardized questionnaire. No detailed study has been conducted on sacred tree practices and its role in Theni district. Therefore, Ethnomedicinal uses and other related information about sacred trees occurring in the 18 temples of Theni district have been documented in the present study in the year 2023. The result has revealed the occurrence of 13 plant species in the 18 temples. Most of the temples are maintained by Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment department of Tamil Nadu Government while very few are maintained by local villagers. *Aegle marmelos* (L.) was the most frequently recorded sacred tree (n=5) in the present study. Species were accurately identified and authenticated, and specimens were preserved for further use. The study suggests certain recommendations for protecting the sacred trees maintained in the temples.

Keywords: Sacred trees, Sacred Tree, Theni district, Hindu temples, Medicinal uses, Conservation

1. Introduction

Tamil Nadu is India's southernmost state which is the tenth largest by area and sixth largest by population. This state is renowned for its ancient and traditional Hindu temples, which have a rich history spanning thousands of years [1]. Each temple in Tamil Nadu has a main deity, a pond, and a tree, just like in other states in India. People from Kashmir to Kanyakumari celebrate many religious festivals in temple premises, which is known for its unity in diversity through customs, belief, languages, and culture [2]. For several years, people have been cultivating sacred trees in every temple and naming it “sacred trees”. This special tree is preserved, safeguarded, prayed over, protected, and revered by the temple administrators and devotees as well. Ancient scriptures indicate that temples throughout India, and Tamil Nadu in particular, have a wide range of medicinal plants and trees. Our predecessors understood the significance of trees and utilized them for varied purposes [3].

Sacred plant worship was a prevalent practice that persisted throughout the Vedic period in India as reported by scientists and historians [4]. The veneration of sacred trees was not limited to India; it was also observed among the monotheist religious populations of Israel and the Middle East [5]. In China, Rituals and the use of ritual plants reflect the Hani people's reverence for nature, respect for life, gratitude to ancestors, and desire for blessings and disaster prevention for their families, crops, and livestock [6]. Koreans revere *Ficus religiosa* (Bo tree or sacred fig) and *Ficus benghalensis* (Indian banyan) for their immense spiritual and therapeutic values. We can understand that trees are revered and preserved in spiritual places and worshiping yards all over the world [7].

The present study is a research project which aimed to document the sacred trees in Hindu temples located in Theni district. The district is situated in the natural hilly surroundings and covered with forests and trees. The major crops grown in the district are paddy, corn, cumbu (pearl millet), maize, pulses, sugarcane, groundnut, gingili, cotton and both perennial and nonperennial horticulture crops. Periyar river, the perennial river in the district is the main source of

irrigation in the district. Vaigai, Kottagudi, Suruliyar, Varaganathi, Manjalar, and Varattaru seasonal rivers are also catering to the needs of the district. There are four dams viz. Periyar, Vaigai, Manjalar and Sothuparai which are essential for agricultural activities [8].

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Area

The field study was carried out in traditional Hindu temples located in Theni Districts, Tamil Nadu State. Theni district which is part of Tamil Nadu state has a population of 1.245 million which is a mix of urban (55%) and rural (45%). Area of this district is 3242.3 sq. kms. Theni District is located between 9º 3" and 10 º 30" north latitude and between 77 º 00 and 78 º 30 of east longitude. The Theni District is surrounded in the north by Dindigul district, on the east by Madurai District, on the south by a part of Virudhunagar district and on the west by the Idukki district of Kerala. There are five Revenue Taluks namely Periyakulam, Andipatti, Theni, Bodinayakanur, and Uthamapalayam that belong to Theni district.

2.2 Field Survey

Field survey was conducted in and around the temples and villages nearby the temples. Through submission of the letter, specific permission was obtained from the temple authorities because many of the temples are being managed by Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department (HR&CE), Government of Tamil Nadu (Figure 1). A questionnaire was prepared based on the literature review and objectives framed for the present research work [9].

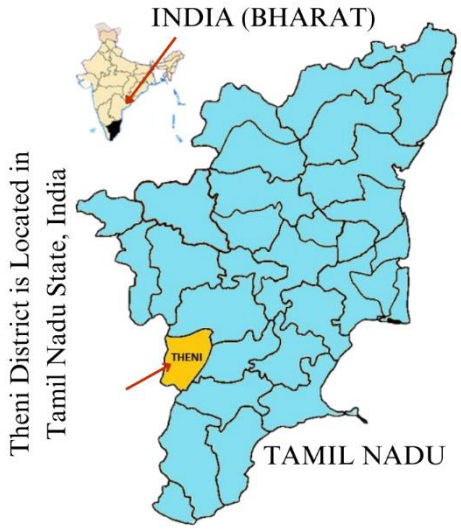


Figure 1. Map of the Study Area (Theni District Yellow-colored).

18 temples were included in this study. Lord Shiva was the main deity in 10 temples, Lord Vishnu in 5 temples, Lord Murugan in one temple and Goddess Sakthi in One temple. Another local deity pertaining to the indigenous faith was found in one temple. The questions were used to collect and identify the sacred trees maintained in and around the temples of the target district. Native people, poojari, and priests were interviewed with the questionnaire. Ethnobotanical details, medicinal properties and conservation aspects were collected and recorded by interviewing the local traditional medical practitioners. Species were properly identified and authenticated, and specimens were preserved. Literature published in the local language (Tamil) and scientific reports have been basis to compare the results and discuss the data. Taxonomic identification was carried out using the flora and leaves [10-14].

3. Results and Discussion

In the current field study, seven temples have been chosen in Uthamapalayam, five in Periyakulam, four in Bodinayakanur, and two in Andipatti. No historical temple with sacred tree was found in theni taluk. Only five of the 18 temples are thought to have existed for about 1000 years, and six for about 800 years. Another five of the 18 temples are existing for about 500 years, with 2 remaining for about 600 years. In total, 15 temples are being managed by HR&CE, Government of Tamil Nadu. Sri Kalahasthiswarar temple, Vikramapandiswaramudaiyar temple and Sri Vaanmiganathar Eswaran temples are managed by people volunteers in the local village. All the 18 temples had sacred trees and totally 13 sacred trees species of dicotyledons which belongs to 10 families have been identified and documented (Table 1). It is noticed that Aegle marmelos was the most frequently recorded tree (n=5) at the temples (5 temples). About 16 temples are in the plane except for Malaimel Vaithiyanatha Swamy temple and Paramasivam temple which are located on mount-hillock. Balasubramaniyaswamy temple and Kanneswaramudaiyar temple are situated beside the bank of Varahi river and Mullai periyar river respectively. Sthala-vrikshas located in all the 18 temples are worshiped by devotees in the study area. *Magnolia champaca L,* which is Sthala-vriksha of Thirukkalatheeswarar Temple, Uthamapalayam had to die due to aging before few years. Therefore, the temple authorities planted a new sapling of the same species to continue the tradition. As per the information collected from priest, *Aegle marmelos* (Vilvam tree) which is sacred tree of Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple, Andipatti died three years ago due to age. Temple authorities planted a new *Aegle marmelos* tree immediately inside the temple premises. In addition, another *Aegle marmelos* (Same species of sacred tree) tree was found in the temple premises. Similarly, sacred tree (*Dichrostachys cinerea*) in Saneeswaran Temple, Kuchanur became a dead tree in 2013 and new tree has been planted subsequently. The new tree has been photographed and furnished in this article in the Figure section.

In many temples, no information about the sacred tree or its significance was displayed on the board. Only in Poolanantheesvarar Temple located in Chinnamanur, we found one inscription under the sacred tree with detailed information (Figure 2 and 3). The inscription states that *Randia obcordata* (Rubiaceae) became sacred tree of this temple in 9th century C.E when Lord Shiva blessed this tree and changed his name from Arikesarinathar into Poolanantheesvarar, because of the importance given to this tree.

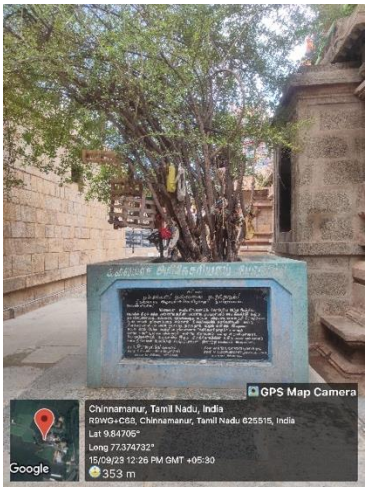


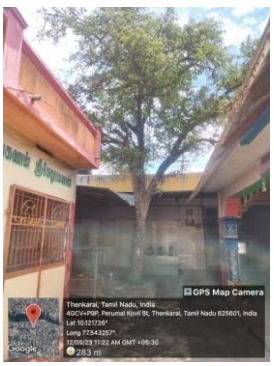
Figure 2 Inscription under the sacred tree in Poolanantheesvarar Temple, Theni.

Based on the field study and literature survey, it was observed that sacred tree plants are used for treating various ailments by native traditional medical practitioners (Nattu Vaidyas). Medicinal properties of the 13 sacred trees have been listed in the Table 2. The leaves, fruits, roots, bark, seeds, and latex of the sacred trees have medicinal properties. Villagers have known these medicinal values through oral knowledge passed down from their ancestors. The villagers and senior citizens have well known the medicinal importance of the trees. Since it was not properly documented by collecting information from the senior citizens of the villages, present generations are not able to preserve this traditional knowledge. Flowers from the sacred tree of certain trees are most revered and offered to the main deity of the temple.

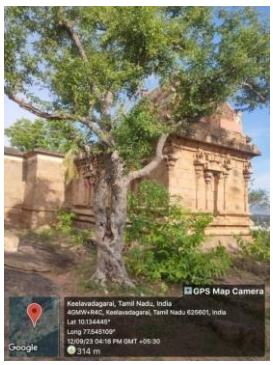
Sacred plant: *Sapindus emarginatus* Vahl (Balasubramaniyaswamy Temple)

Sacred plant: *Ficus religiosa* L. (Mayapandeeswarar Sokkanathar Temple)

Sacred plant: *Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* L. (Varatharajaperumal Temple)



Sacred plant: *Aegle marmelos* L.Corrêa (Sri Kalahasthiswarar Temple)



Sacred plant: *Aegle marmelos* L.Corrêa (Malaimel Vaithiyanatha Swamy Temple)

Sacred plant: *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss. (Gowmariamman Temple)

Sacred plant: *Aegle marmelos* L.Corrêa
(Kanneswaramudaiyar Temple)

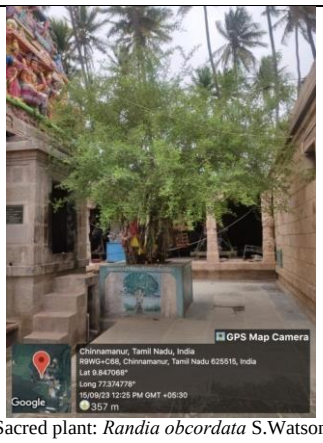
Sacred plant: *Aegle marmelos* L.Corrêa
(Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple)

Sacred plant: *Mimusops elengi* L.
(Kathali Narasingaperumal Temple)

Sacred plant: *Aegle marmelos* L.Corrêa
(Seenivasaperumal Temple)

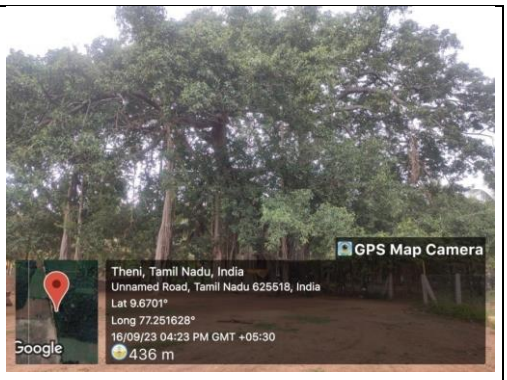
Sacred plant: *Ficus virens* Dryand
(Paramasivam Temple)

Sacred plant: *Mimusops elengi* L.
(Lakshminarayana Perumal Temple)



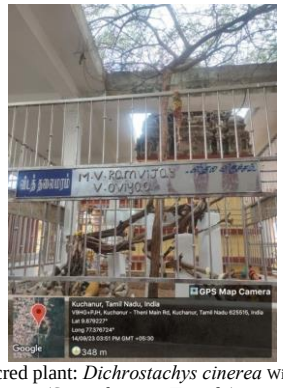
Sacred plant: *Randia obcordata* S.Watson
(Poolanantheesvarar Temple)

Sacred plant: *Magnolia champaca* L. Baill
(New sapling)
(Thirukkalatheeswarar Temple)

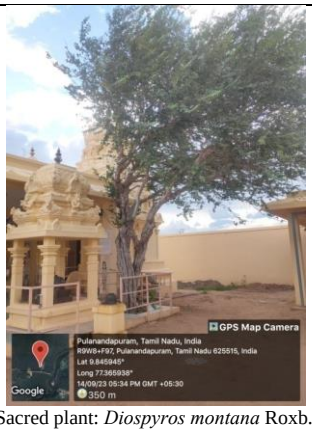


Sacred plant: *Ficus benghalensis* L.
(Vanmiganathar Eswaran Temple)

Sacred plant: *Tamarindus indica* L.
(Koodal Azhagiyaperumal Temple)



Sacred plant: *Dichrostachys cinerea* Wight.
(Saneeshwaran Temple)



Sacred plant: *Diospyros montana* Roxb.
(Vikramapandiswaramudaiyar Temple)

Figures 2. Photographs of Sacred Trees (Sthala-vriksha's) in Theni District

Table 1. sacred trees documented in 18 Temples of Theni district (In September, 2023)

S.No	Name of The Temple	Age of The Temple (Years)	Name of Deities	Botanical Name and family	Sacred Tree (sacred trees)	Age of the Sacred Tree (sacred trees) years	Parts used in sacred trees			
							Flower	Fruit	Leaf	Bark
1.	Balasubramaniyaswamy Temple, Thenkarai, Periyakulam.	700 - 900	Rajendra Choleeswarar, Aramvalartha Nayagi Amman, Balasubramaniyaswamy	*Sapindus emarginatus* Vahl (Sapindaceae)	Neikottan Maram	70	-	+	-	-
2.	Mayapandeeswarar Sokkanathar Temple, Melmangalam	800	Mayapandeeswarar Sokkanathar, Periyanayagi Amman,	*Ficus religiosa* L. (Moraceae)	Arasamaram	300	-	-	+	+
3.	Varatharajaperumal Temple, Thenkarai, Periyakulam.	500	Varatharajaperumal, Perundevi Thayar, Sri Devi, Boo Devi	*Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* L. (Oleaceae)	Pavalamalli	30	+	-	-	-
4.	Sri Kalahasthiswarar Temple, Thenkarai, Periyakulam.	800	Kalahasthiswarar, Gnanambigai Amman	*Aegle marmelos* L. Corrêa (Rutaceae)	Vilvam	80	-	+	+	-
5.	Malaimel Vaithiyanatha Swamy Temple, Vadakarai, Periyakulam.	600	Vaithiyanathar, Thaiyal Nayagi Amman	*Aegle marmelos* L. Correa (Rutaceae)	Vilvam	150	-	+	+	-
6.	Gowmariamman Temple, Veerapandi	900	Gowmariamman	*Azadirachta indica* A. Juss. (Meliaceae)	Vepamaram	5-10	+	+	+	-
7.	Kanneswaramudaiyar Temple, Veerapandi	1000	Kanneswaramudaiyar, Aramvalartha Nayagi Amman	*Aegle marmelos* L.Corrêa (Rutaceae)	Vilvam	80	-	+	+	-
8.	Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple, Andipatti	600	Sundareswarar, Meenakshi Amman	*Aegle marmelos* L.Corrêa (Rutaceae)	Vilvam	Planted a new tree before 3 years	-	+	+	-
9.	Kathali Narasingaperumal Temple, Jambliputhur	800	Kathali Narasingaperumal, Sengamalavalli Thayar	*Mimusops elengi* L. (Sapotaceae)	Magilamaram	200	+	+	+	+
10.	Seenivasaperumal Temple, Bodinayakanur	300-400	Seenivasaperumal, Batmavathi Thayar	*Aegle marmelos* L. Corrêa (Rutaceae)	Vilvam	150	-	+	+	-

11.	Paramasivam Temple, Bodinayakanur	400	Paramasivam, Laxmi Narayanan, Siva Subramaniyar	*Ficus virens* Dryand. (Moraceae)	Itchymaram	120	-	-	-	-
12.	Lakshminarayana Perumal Temple, Chinnamanur	1000	Lakshminarayana Perumal, Sri Devi, Boo Devi	*Mimusops elengi* L. (Sapotaceae)	Magilamaram	80	+	+	+	+
13.	Poolanantheesvarar Temple, Chinnamanur	1000 - 1100	Poolanantheesvarar, Sivagami Amman	*Randia obcordata* S.Watson (Rubiaceae)	Mur Poolamaram	1100	-	-	-	-
14.	Thirukkalatheeswarar Temple, Uthamapalayam	1400	Thirukkalatheeswarar, Gnanambigai Ambal	*Magnolia champaca* L. Baill (Magnoliaceae)	Sembagam	Planted a new tree in July 2023	+	-	+	-
15.	Vanmiganathar Eswaran Temple, Keelagudalur	1000	Vanmiganathar Eswaran	*Ficus benghalensis* L. (Moraceae)	Alammaram	400	-	+	+	+
16.	Koodal Azhagiyaperumal Temple, Keelagudalur	500	Koodal Azhagiyaperumal, Sundararajan, Mahalakshmi	*Tamarindus indica* L. (Fabaceae)	Puliyamaram	100 above	+	+	+	+
17.	Saneeshwaran Temple, Kuchanur	300-400	Saneeshwaran	*Dichrostachys cinerea* Wight et Arn. (Fabaceae)	Vidathalai Maram	10	-	-	+	-
18.	Vikramapandiswaramudaiyar Temple, Markayankottai	800	Vikramapandiswaramudaiya, Abirami Ammbal	*Diospyros montana* Roxb. (Ebenaceae)	Vakkanathi	300	-	-	+	-

Table 2 Medicinal properties of the 13 sacred trees

S.No	Botanical Name	Family	Tamil Name	Plant Part Used	Medicinal uses
1.	*Ficus religiosa* L.	Moraceae	Arasamaram	Leaf	Wound healing, constipation
				Bark	Tooth pain and gum strength
				Latex	Cure cracked heels
				Fruits	Asthma, Infertility, Constipation
2	*Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* L.	Oleaceae	Pavalamalli	Leaf	Constipation for children, indigestion, Fever
				Bark	Cold, constipation
				Seeds	Induce hair growth
3	*Mimusops elengi* L.	Sapotaceae	Magilamaram	Flower	Headache
				Bark	tonic, fever, induce fertility, teeth and gum infection
				Fruits	Control diarrhea
				Root	Tumor and pimples
4	*Ficus virens* Dryand	Moraceae	Itchymaram	Fruits	Constipation
				Seeds	Induce semen count
5	*Magnolia champaca* L. Baill	Magnoliaceae	Sembagam	Flowers	Fever, Urinary infection
				Leaf	Stomach pain
6	*Ficus benghalensis* L.	Moraceae	Ala maram	Aerial Roots	Tooth decay, Hair growth
				Fruits	Obesity
				Bark	Venereal disease
7	*Tamarindus indica* L.	Fabaceae	Puliyamaram	Leaf	Wound healing, Joint pain, Throat infection
				Bark	Stomach pain, Induce digestion
				Flower	Eye infections, Indigestion
				Fruits	Induce digestion, Reduce stomach problem, Diarrhea
8	*Dichrostachys cinerea* Wight et Arn.	Fabaceae	Vidathalaimaram	Leaf	Pneumonia and leprosy
				Bark	Diarrhea and postpartum pain
				Roots	Syphilis and leprosy, aphrodisiac
9	*Azadirachta indica* A. Juss.	Meliaceae	Vepamaram	Bark	Fever and vomiting, Skin disease, Rheumatoid arthritis

				Leaf	Stomach worms, the jaundice
				Flower	Stomach problems,
				Fruits	Urinary problems, piles, leprosy, stomach worms
10	*Aegle marmelos* L.Corrêa	Rutaceae	Vilvam	Leaf	diabetic mellitus, jaundice, poultice, headache
				Root	Fever, Increased heart rate
				Fruits	Body heat, Eye Irritation, Piles, Diarrhea
11	*Sapindus emarginatus* Vahl	Sapindaceae	Neikottan Maram	Leaf	Heavy cold
				Fruits	Hair Tonic, Headache, Snake Bite, Diarrhea [12]
				Seeds	Tooth Ache
12	*Randia obcordata* S.Watson	Rubiaceae	Murpoolamaram	Leaves	Fungal Infections [13]
13	*Diospyros montana* Roxb.	Ebenaceae	Vakkanathi	Bark	Jaundice, Tuberculosis [14]
				Roots	An abortifacient [15]

4. Conclusion

Hindu temples in Tamil Nadu have a long history dating back thousands of years and are deeply ingrained in local culture. Temples were originally built and managed by kings in past. In the last century, many of the temples were taken over by the Government of Tamil Nadu and are now being managed by the HR&CE department of the Government. However, the participation of people who manage temples and protect the sacred trees is enormous. People have great reverence for the temple premises, and the sacred trees maintained in the temples. Not only government, but also people as a community are more interested and dedicated to managing the temples and sacred trees. It is the duty of ethnobotanists and researchers to document the sacred trees and preserve them for long years against damage caused by catastrophic events and environmental factors. Hindu culture has instilled devotion among the people towards not only God and Temples, but also Trees, because trees are important for medicinal and other aspects. In three temples, it was found that a new sapling was planted after the sacred trees died of aging. Therefore, the study suggests that the germplasm conservation of the sacred trees may be initiated by the botanists and agricultural scientists. Seeds of the aged sacred trees may be collected and plants may be reproduced in the temple premises. Temple authorities may take steps to protect the existing sacred trees by fencing around the trees to protect the trees from insects, natural calamities, cyclones, and any sort of damages. The temple authorities shall install a bulletin board around the sacred trees so that devotees and others are aware of their historical and religious significance. In the future, we may investigate what prompted the ancestors to plant a particular tree in a specific temple and connection between sacred tree and other ecological aspects.

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Conflict of interest

The Authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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