

Life Forms, Sacred Spaces and Sustenance in South India : Patram, Pushpam and Phalam

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Abstract: The veneration of life forms in South India has been explored as a paradigm for its multidimensional interpretations and cultural meanings in a land where holiness is a common attribute to creation. The various plants, shrubs, creepers, fruits and leaves have sacred conceptions and community reverence has served as an agent of traditional legitimation for its continuity in the religious ethos. The old mountains of the Eastern Ghats, far more hoary than the Himalayas, are thickly vegetated with deciduous varieties of seasonal and perennial fruits, trees and flowers which have been fetishes of Hindu worship for centuries. This paper would examine the inter-relatedness between the Vedic texts, Puranic lore and natural life forms, with descriptive references to Sanskrit literature of Medieval India (Malavikagnimitra and Kumarasambhava). The Coconut occupies a chief position in the pantheon of ritual offering and its ubiquity across *pujas* and the *naivedyams* are proof of its importance, which has a Puranic background. The Ketaki flower of Lingodbhava fame, Vilva bushes favoured by Shaivites, the Frangipanis on Mahavishnu accompanied by crimson Hibiscus flowers, has legendary association with the Skanda and Shiva puranas. Sacred groves (Nandita Krishna, 2014) at temples and the symbolic marital tie between the Ashwattha tree and the Neem represent an ecological harmony. The traditional betel leaf and nuts, an auspicious offering, signifies plenty and three time harvest in the peninsula. This link between religious meanings and vegetation inculcated a system of conservation and equilibrium, which the colonial hiatus supplanted with its monocultures of the mind (Vandana Shiva, 1993), scripted an unjust requiem to Bharatiya methods of preservation, where sacredness and sustenance co-existed.