

# AGASTHYA

Volume 5 Issue 3

Fading trail of  
**Athri**

Geography  
and Myth

The journey of a  
forest deity

Whisperings of  
**Amma**

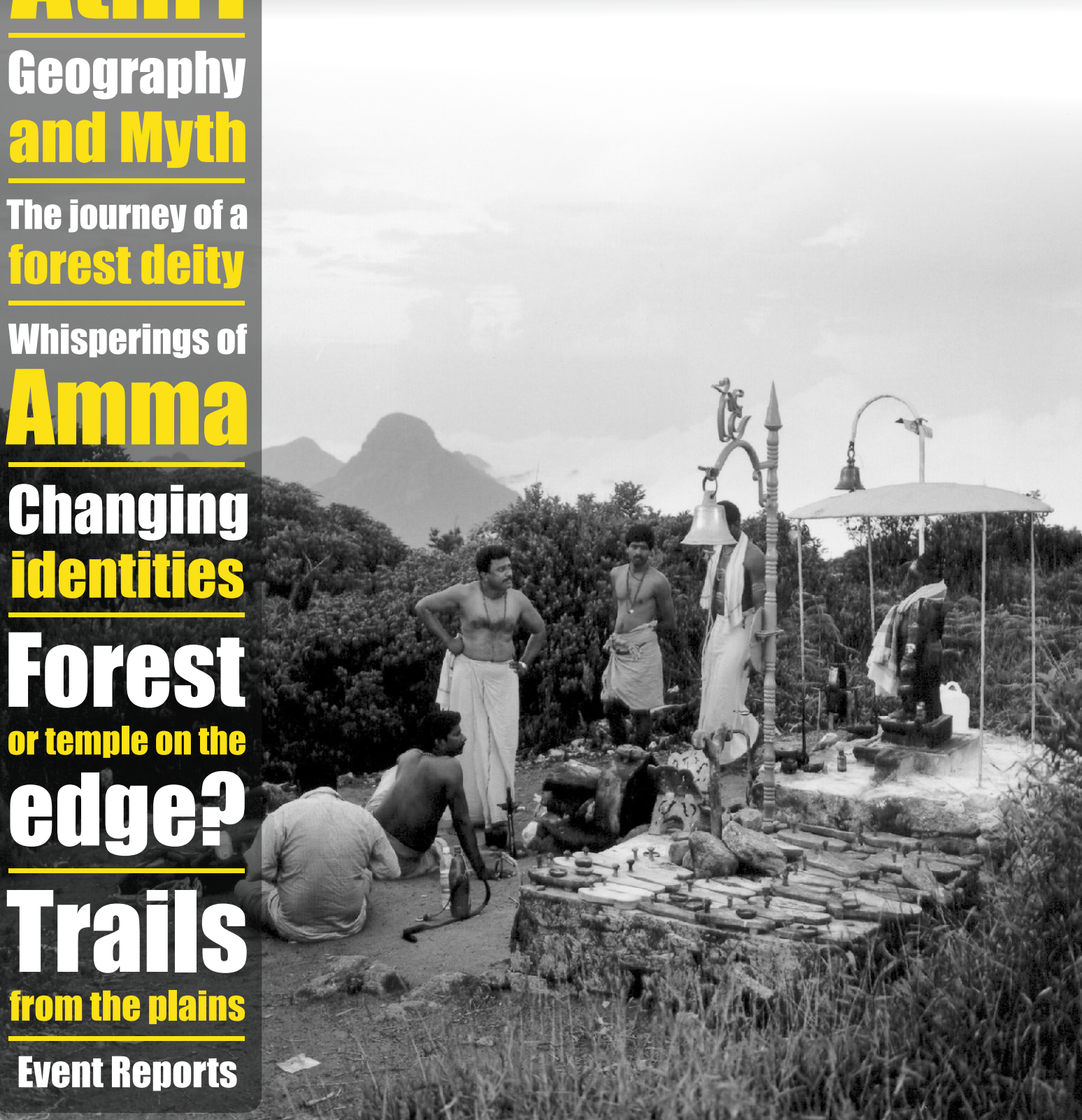
Changing  
identities

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or temple on the  
edge?

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from the plains

Event Reports

SPECIAL FOCUS:  
Religious Enclaves



## 'Notes from the editor'

### Festivals in transition

Watching Diwali festivity this season, I noticed how changes in the family structure, increase in disposable income, lack of time and other reasons have changed the way festivals are celebrated. Drawing parallels, the way religious sites in KMTR function have also changed. What used to be quaint gatherings have now grown, in some cases, to uncontrollable crowds leaving behind their waste inside the forest which will probably remain there for eons. Most rituals seem to be losing the essence of the festivals itself and appear to be just a commercial venture. Yet, examples exist, which show how pilgrims and rituals are still maintaining harmony with nature. This issue of Agasthya focuses on religious sites in KMTR and offers insights on varied aspects. In addition, an invited article has been featured for the first time in Agasthya. A new section, 'Research Highlights', has also been added to the existing sections of experiences from the forest, event update and snippets from the field. The update from the recent crisis at Vaagaikulam tank shows how researchers can cross the barrier they set for themselves within the cozy walls of elitism and act!

- Allwin Jesudasan

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Cover page image: Shrine at Agasthyamalai peak Credit: Ian Lockwood

Flip of cover page image: Bathers with Agasthyamalai in the background Credit: Ian Lockwood

Back cover: Biologically and culturally rich and diverse landscape of the Agasthyamalai Credit: R Ganesan

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## Fading trail of Athri Maharishi ...

Tucked in the north eastern part of KMTR is the Athri hills, clad in evergreen forests right from the base to its higher reaches. This contrasts the southern parts where low elevation starts with thorny scrubby jungles. The gap in the Athri hill range allows more moisture from the western side to enter the region all year around which has resulted in dry evergreen forest even in the lower elevation. The dry evergreen forest is considered to be rich in medicinal plants, which has brought here many 'siddhars' (siddha medicine practitioners) in search of plants for their practice. The access to these hills is still through a bridle path which crosses the Kallar river, and the lack of a good jeepable road so far has kept it away from the glare of tourists. Legend has it that Athri Maharishi and his wife Anushiya made these hills their home, raised their two children and hence the name Athri hills. It is also believed that Sage Athri created the "Ganga River" for his ardent disciple Korakkanathar in the form of a spring in these hills. Even today, we see this perennial spring which bears water all through the year. At the center of the spring stands a Ganga Devi idol, which was installed by the Athri followers in his memory. Although the installation is estimated to be about 1,200 years old, other deities have been added over time. The villagers now call it Murugan temple and the legend of Athri seems to be slowly fading



T Ganesh

Athri Maharishi

away. Also, another deity, Karupusamy whose idol is about five km away from the site is hardly remembered. In 2004, the quaint place close to the spring was replaced by a concrete structure and also got consecrated with a pompous festival. Chitthirai pournami (new moon in the first month of the Tamil year) is the main festival of this temple which draws 2,500 people who camp inside the forests for a night. With mounting pressure from the forest department the camping has been abandoned recently. Apart from this, on every full moon and new moon days about 200 to 300 people gather here. With festival

comes garbage accumulation.

Fortunately for the forest, the Ulavaarapani group from Ambasamudram, a nearby town, along with a few motivated individuals from V. K. Puram collect the garbage on every first Sunday of the month and move it to the plains. Strangely, below this temple in a lime stone cave formation, lies a mosque which came into existence about 300 years ago. Today it attracts 2,000 people during Kanthuri festival. Recently a new mosque was added close to it. All the devotees visit both holy shrines without any conflict. However, it is important to regulate the crowd as any religious gathering has the natural tendency to blow out of proportion, as we have learnt from Sori Muthian Kovil (SMK) and Sabarimalai. These holy places came into existence in remote areas for devotees to experience 'being removed from their routine life' by facing hardships and sacrificing their luxuries. Today, these values are eroding with increasing paraphernalia of facilities that are associated with any popular tourist area. In addition, this site is being promoted to encourage increase in commerce. SMK stands as a testimony for succumbing to such a trajectory in the landscape. We hope, Athri hills retains its charm, as the sage had seen it, for the many years to come.

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## Geography and myth on Agasthyamalai

At the heart of the Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, sharing a border with Kerala's protected areas, is a distinctive mountain that is associated with myth as much as it is with the tremendous biodiversity of its slopes. Agasthyamalai or Pothigai (as it is known in Tamil), is no ordinary mountain. Amongst the steep slopes of scrub forest, valleys of dense tropical rain forest, and jagged peaks, Agasthyamalai stands as a sentinel. Agasthyamalai has a distinct conical profile that is nearly identical from both eastern and western sides. From either Trivandrum in the west or Tirunelveli in the east it stands out as a distinguished peak amongst a range of sharp, craggy mountains. Relatively speaking it is a lesser peak in the chain of mountains that make up the 1,400 km long Western Ghats. Dodabetta in the Nilgiris (2,623 m), Karnataka's Mullayanagiri (1,918 m) and Anai-Mudi (2,694 m), South India's highest peak are all far higher. Yet, there is something about Agasthyamalai that transcends mere height (1,868 m) and size. Agasthyamalai's profile bears an uncanny resemblance to Tibet's Mt. Kailash and this has perhaps led to its aura and many myths.

Agasthyamalai's namesake is derived from the great sage who is said to have given the Tamil language to India's Dravidian people many years ago. Agasthya is associated with herbal remedies and is often depicted holding a stone crusher in one hand and a vessel in the other. The significance of this and the fact that Agasthyamalai hills are known for their medicinal plants should not be overlooked. The most pertinent myth regarding the mountain relates to Agasthya and the marriage of Lord Ishwara (Siva) and Parvathi in the heavenly realm of Mt. Kailash (the sacred peak in Tibet at 6,740 m). When the wedding was announced, all the world's gods, rishis and people migrated north to the Himalaya. As a result, the earth went dangerously off balance. With disaster looming, Ishwara asked Agasthya to go south and balance the situation through meditation. After meditating and praying on the mountain that now bears his namesake the world was once again put in balance.

As the readers of this journal are well aware of, the Ashambu Hills play a key ecological role both from a water and biodiversity point

of view. The hilly areas form a critical water catchment for both eastern and western coasts. Thus, millions of farmers are dependent on the mountains as a source of water for their crops. While the plains are parched for much of the year the hills can receive as much as 6,000 mm of rain depending on the location. The Tambraparani is one of the many significant rivers that have its origins in the forests of Agasthyamalai.

For many years there has been a low-intensity religious pilgrimage to the summit of Agasthyamalai. A small shrine with a modest image of Agasthya marks the spot and pilgrims have to take on a 2-3 day arduous and at times, death-defying trail to get there. There are approaches from both Kerala and Tamil Nadu with the former being very popular. The pilgrim's path is generally not well known and forest officials are well aware of the potential ecological impact that such a pilgrimage could cause if it became popular. The case of Sabarimalai, just a little to the north, illustrates the danger of open access to spiritual locations in the protected areas.



Ten years ago I had a chance to explore and photograph Agasthyamalai peak on a series of visits, where I interacted with forest department officials, pilgrims, Kanis and conservationists. I can't speak about changes since that time but certainly in 2001-02 the area around the peak showed signs of impact from the pilgrimage. Vegetation had been trampled and hacked down in places. Litter, with the ever-present plastic bag, was noticeable on the approach from Neyyar and Pepara. This summer, I visited the Tambraparani near Kariyar reservoir and noted the steady stream of pilgrims who visit Banatheertham Falls. Balance is the trick and forest officials have a delicate task balancing the needs of growing numbers of pilgrims and visitors with the strict conservation guidelines needed to maintain KMTR's remarkable biodiversity.



Ian Lockwood

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Agasthyamalai northridge

## The journey of a forest deity

Vanapetchi, Petchimuthu, Petchiammal, Muthupetchi, Vanaraja are very common names in villages surrounding KMTR as these names are derived from Vanapetchi. Of the many old Vanapetchiamman (Vanam means forest) Temples in KMTR hills, our article focuses on the one located in Manimutharu forests. People believe that Vanapetchi has extraordinary power to protect humans, forests and wildlife. Manimutharu Vanapetchiamman has an interesting story on its origin. Not long ago, people living in what is currently the buffer zone of KMTR, depended on the forest for their livelihood and timber extraction was the main occupation. According to legend, a

group of people went to Kandamparai (in Manimutharu forest) in bullock cart to cut a big tree. As soon as they started axing the huge tree, blood started trickling from it. However they ignored it and loaded the timber in the cart and proceeded back to the village. Midway when they stopped for lunch, they heard a loud sound from the timber on the cart but once again they ignored it. Soon they converted it to furniture and sold it in Puliur village. Again the loud foreboding sound was heard: "I am inside, I want to go back to the place from where you cut me". This scared the people who in turn, made a small brick pillar for Vanapetchi in Karuvayal, in Manimutharu forest and started worshipping. After construction of Manimutharu dam water covered the Karuvayal so people could not reach that place. Then, a small temple was constructed for Vanapetchi near Manimutharu waterfalls which still stands. Since people could not construct the temple at Kandamparai, the original residence of Vanapetchi, two temples were

constructed - one at the Manimutharu falls and the another one at Manjolai.

At the temple near Manimutharu water falls, Tuesdays and Fridays are important worship days. The sacrifice of goat and cock is a common practice. Rituals like infant naming and ear piercing ceremony are commonly conducted too. In the course of time, the temple started attracting visitors from far flung areas. Tamil month of Adi is of special significance when about 5,000 people, mostly originating from villages close-by, camp in the surrounding forests. With cheap polythene replacing traditional banana leaves, accumulation of wastes in forests, streams and the river is emerging as a serious issue in the complete absence of any waste management/disposal system. With Manimutharu falls being a popular tourist spot, many pleasure seeking tourists take advantage of lenient entry policies. Thus, it is not uncommon to see an exponential increase in the number of 'pilgrims' during weekends instead of only Tuesdays and Fridays. Stricter, on-spot vigilance and a universal entry fee must be immediate measures which could help to regulate the inflow. However, to achieve long term goals, collaboration and co-ordination of Forest Department along with District Administration, village panchayats and local NGOs is crucial.



A scene after feast. Leaves for serving food are slowly being replaced with plastic leaves

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## Whisperings of Amma from the 'grey jungles' of Agasthyamalai

Trekkers, naturalists and researchers who have treaded Agasthyamalai landscape could not have missed the 'grey jungles' of Dohnavur fellowship. The fellowship was founded in 1901, at the foothills of Kalakad range by an Irish Christian missionary Amy Carmichael, who fought against devadasi 'and' built an asylum for young female children who were forced into prostitution. As with any British, Amy had a fascination for the hills and the wilderness. This drew her to the forest bungalow in Sengaltheri with all her inmates, particularly during the peak summers every year when the plains were scorching. She soon realized that the foundation required a similar place of its own and acquired 'Naraikadu or the grey jungles' in 1917 against all odds. Today the 'grey jungle' stands as a testimony of how private sanctuaries can match or even excel some of the state efforts. The 'grey jungle' lies entrenched inside the tiger reserve, and was never annexed like other private holdings. This exception has been based on the efforts of the fellowship to restore and conserve forests. It is also a model of how a religious establishment can be in harmony with forests around them while contrasting situations exist elsewhere within the region.

A strenuous trek up the hill from the Thirukurungudi village close to Kalakad town takes you to the 'Jewel house' built by Amy, her companions and co-workers. It is located amongst a hill stream, pools and waterfalls. Frank Houghton, her biographer, says that

'Amma' (mother), as Amy is reverently addressed, maintained a forest log of events and experiences. One of her entries observed that "There was room in the forests for all creatures as well as ourselves". Amy made it to the 'Jewel house' year after year and until she became too weak. Amy had sat in the forest house and written many books and composed many poems on nature. The inmates of the fellowship have ever since made this journey to the forest in the hills and for many, it is here that 'His voice is heard in the cool of the forest'. They see God in the serenity of the grey jungle.

The fellowship has attracted Webb Pepelope, a naturalist who went on to write about the mammals of Tirunelveli hills and Ian Lockwood, a well known nature photographer has eternalized many scenes from the 'grey jungle'. Several researchers, naturalists, and nature lovers continue to visit the grey jungle. In a recent conversation with



Jewel house - Snake valley in the backdrop

Jeremiah Rajanesan, who is currently heading the fellowship, informed us that their forest log book is a treasure trove of information such as tiger sightings which needs to be coded and analyzed.

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## Sorimuthian Kovil - past romance and present challenges



Cacophony in the woods

KMTR, although primarily protected for its biological heritage and diversity, nestles various religious and cultural enclaves. Prominent among them is the Sorimuthian Kovil (SMK), an old temple patronized by the Singampatti Palayam of the Pandian dynasty. It has been traditionally managed by the erstwhile Zamin of Singampatti and the temple trustees. Even after the notification of the area as a Tiger Reserve in 1988, the traditional management authorities were retained. The temple premises, including the sanctum sanctorum, cover an area of a few hectares. It is situated between Papanasam and Karaiyar Dam, in a serene and secluded atmosphere. However, the tranquility is severely tattered during the Adi-Amavasai festival, falling in the Tamil month of Adi (between July – August) during which the Sorimuthian temple attracts an estimated two lakh visitors. The festival spreads over three days with preparations for it starting almost a month earlier. Notwithstanding the religious rituals and sentiments, the festival also acts



as a major socio-cultural fiesta for the people from the surrounding areas. The festival's huge congregation also offers an opportune moment for the erstwhile Zamindar, popularly known as the Raja of Singampatti, to conduct a customary durbar during the festival with high voltage traditional dances and martial arts being performed in his honor. Muthianar with his two consorts Poorna and Pushkala is the main deity to be worshipped, along with other deities like Sangili Boothathar, Thoosi Madan, Karadi Madan, Petchi, Isakki, Pattavarayan and many more deities called Bootha-kanas. Mahalinga Swamy is represented in the form of lingam called 'Swayambulingam' meaning that it appeared on its own.

Many folk-stories are attributed to this temple. Sorimuthian is from the term 'Sori Muthu Aiyan'. Sori in Tamil means shower, Muthu in classical Tamil means flowers, Aiyan represents Aiyanar. The legend is that Agasthya, while he was worshiping Shiva, had a gnanadhrishti (divine vision) whereby he saw Shiva-Parvathi showering flowers (blessings) on Aiyanar who was worshiping the Shiva-Parvathi in the location where the

temple is located today. Thus, Sorimuthian is popularly known as the Lord who showers blessings (in the form of rain) in the plateau. The temple is divided into two, by the passage of a branch from the main river. A temple is erected for Pattavarayan, a Brahmin, and his two wives, belonging to the cobbler community, a rare example of inter-caste marriage from yore. According to a popular legend Lord Pattavarayan, a warrior, lost his life defending the marauding forces of bandits trying to take away all the cattle from the temple-area. His wives perform 'Sati' (committing suicide) to join the departed husband's soul.

The three days of Adi Amavasai period are celebrated with high festivity. All these rich and deep-sitting cultural and religious sentiments results in the gargantuan influx which includes large number of pilgrims and cultural tourists. Apart from them, numerous petty shopkeepers, politicians, representatives and activists of social welfare and environmental-protection, and police also are present in sizeable number. Although people come from all over Tamil Nadu, great proportions of the regular

pilgrims originate from Alangulam taluk of Tirunelveli district. While the peak human-presence is seen during the main three days of the festival, many others extend their stay beyond it and few even camp up to a month. Over the years with rapid improvement in surface transport and communication modes in the area, there seems to have been an exponential increase in the presence and influx of humans particularly during the festival. With improved camping facilities and better access, there is an increase in the number of campers as well as camping period with the camps spilling over in the surrounding forest. At ATREE, we have been trying to balance activism, research and outreach for the past five years to not only control, but also negate the adverse impacts of such a large gathering on the surrounding forests. However, the greater challenge to devise ways to counter the impacts without harming the religious sentiments of the people remains.

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## Changing identities

As a part of a larger study which required interactions with the 'Kanis', an indigenous tribe found in the Agasthyamalai region, I began taking a personal interest in observing the inherent religious processes, structure and functions. My first encounter of a unique Kani religious symbol was just a few well kept stones that lay decorated in the fringes of Injikuli, by the banks of Tamirabarani. Instinctively, I assumed homogeneity in religious symbolism represented by the neatly arranged stones of Injikuli across the

different Kani settlements inside KMTR. However, with continuous interactions over four years I understood that even for a small, homogenous and isolated population with a seemingly static societal norms, the trajectory of religion was a dynamic one, undergoing rapid change, transformation and metamorphosis. Today the Kanis, apart from sustaining age old practices of offering their land produce during Karthige month at Kodethi just outside Periya Mylar, have also started incorporating rituals and totems

generally associated with mainstream religions. For example, there is a statue of 'Karumaandi Amman' a deity of another dominant community of the landscape in the Kani sacred site in Chinna Mylar. In Servalar, the Kanis' participation in the annual festival of the Sangili Boothathar temple was not too common about a decade ago. Interestingly this temple was built by the labourers who had come from the plains during the construction of Servalar dam. In addition to such rituals, there have been Christian evangelists who preach to the Kanis intermittently and find a substantial audience in them. A few families in Servalar and about fifty per cent of the population in Agasthyamalai Kani Kudiruppu now follow a certain sect of Christianity. Though they do not have a religious site inside KMTR, frequent meetings are held in one of the 'believers' houses. Though the Kanis follow varied religions, old community practices are still retained and often combined with newer ones they are beginning to adopt. Yet, there seems to be an inner urge among the Kanis to identify themselves with the larger section of the society. Though it may not have conservation significance, it would be interesting to study why the Kanis feel the need to merge or associate themselves with the mainstream identities.



'Karumaandi Amman' along with Kani's traditional deity in Chinne Mylar

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## Forest or temple on the edge?



Most times of the year, the temple is calm and quaint

If you happen to drive on the narrow road north of Kalakad you will notice a huge hill to your left as you near the small town of Kolundamamalai, a scrub clad hill jutting out of the plains and separated from KMTR by a deep and narrow irrigation canal. The legend behind the origin of the hill has the usual Hanuman story of dropping a part of the Sanjivini mountain he was carrying from the Himalayas to cure Lakshman of a near fatal wound. The name Kolundamamalai is supposed to come from 'kolundu' which means fresh leaves. At the base of the hill, approximately two km from the main road, is a small old temple of Murugan which is surrounded by scrub forest and plantations. The temple rarely attracts visitors and once

the evening sun dips behind the Kolundamamalai hill, it remains a desolate place in the tranquil darkness giving company to sambars, civets and the occasional owl.

If you do the same drive at dusk on the day of the Thirukaarthigai or Kartik poornima which falls in November or December, you will notice a small fire (deepam) on top of the hill. During this day the temple is decorated, well lit, music is played and a temporary kitchen is made to feed hundreds of people who come to the temple. A small group of 3-4 people go up the hill early in the day and reach the summit in time to light the fire. The fire is lit in 2-3 places on the hill, some seen from the

west and some from north west. This group returns the next morning after making sure the fire is properly doused. The hundreds of people who visit the temple litter the place. The forest department does its bit by putting up bins to collect the garbage. Fortunately nobody camps in the temple at night and the temple returns to its desolate nature late at night on the poornima day itself.

The Kolundamamalai temple is on the edge of the forest and people do not venture inside the scrub except for the small group that lights the fire. The scrub is very dense in the foothills and almost impenetrable. There is a fair amount of wildlife around the temple; sambar, porcupine, hare, bear, wild boar apart from owls and number of birds of prey that are found in the hills. There is also a small group of langurs but they are confined to the interiors. Our earlier mammal survey also indicated presence of leopard and a tiger on the western side of the hill. The presence of the temple at the edge of the forest does not currently have much impact on the forest itself but to make sure that it does not become a bigger pilgrimage in the near future, sincere efforts will be required. It's still not in the list of Murugan temples in Tamil Nadu which is a blessing but that could be short lived as newer temples are added to the list regularly. To counter this it would be more pertinent to encourage a greener festival with strict regulations working with the temple authority, forest department and other stakeholders that would retain the sanctity and tranquillity of the place.

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## Trails from the plains

The KMTR landscape has several commercial plantations established in early 1900s. They are located in remote and dense forests often with no electricity or basic amenities with only a narrow bridle path leading to the plains below. The plantation workers who have come from the plains bring in their local deities Sodalaimadan, Petchiamman, Pattavarayan etc. to give them moral and religious support to live and work in the forests. The deities are usually a crudely engraved stone set up along paths in the forest, often tied with a red/yellow cloth if it is a goddess and white if it is a male. People walking along these paths would give their offerings and seek blessings from these deities to make their endeavor productive and the journey through the jungle safe.

Due to various reasons many of the

plantations have been abandoned and many of the shrines or stones have been left behind, letting the Gods to guard the forest and spirits of their ancestors. Many of these nondescript stones and shrines like Petchiamman at Netterikal; Ishwaran kovil (which is of more recent lineage of deities) at Chinnamanjolai estate and Pattavarayan at Kulirati estate gets visited by people from the plains once a year during some auspicious day to reconnect with their God and may be even the place. They come in groups of 10s to 100s and are usually workers who were born there or had worked there and therefore have an emotional attachment to the place and the deity. Once at the shrine, they would sacrifice a goat or chicken, have a feast and slowly wind their way down through the jungle path in the growing darkness. It is usually a one

day affair.

However, in the religious constructs found in those estates, which are still functioning, the transformations are starker. Although relatively small, they have come to represent a replica of any big mainstream shrine with large crowds, loud music blaring in the evenings at full pitch through loud speakers and lights. The whole show can go on for more than a day! Traditional practices such as fresh garland are giving way to artificial ones, and devotees dance to loud music, which at times may be completely unconnected to the religion or spirituality of the temple/church/mosque but nevertheless may persist all through the night. Thus, apart from religious sanctity, they have also come to double serve as recreation centers, which sadly in most cases, are politically motivated





M Mathivanan

Pattavarayan

and commercially driven. An ironic sense of competition exist among the various religious groups co-existing in such estates to outdo each other in terms of the volume and pitch of religious fervor often represented by their respective amplified musicals! Thus, one strolling through the estates in the evenings, might be likely to experience a cacophonous fusion of all religious music.

The quaintness of a forest temple is now lost. In the heart of the forest should we not have some restraints on the growth of these modern shrines and bring in stricter regulations on music and sound played in the environment? Would it not be good if the forest department with the religious authorities enforce some restraints?

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## Malaimel Nambi Kovil – an insignia of culture and biodiversity

While traveling from Kalakad towards Thirukurugudi on the bank of Periyakulam one could see a signage directing you to look towards the hills westwards for Malaimel Nambi Kovil. It is a common sight to see travelers join their palms to worship the Lord Vishnu, locally called as Nambi. From this marked vantage point all one can see is a small white speckle nestled in the laps of lush green forest clad mountainous landscape.

The perennial river, Nambiar descending from the mountain skirts the temple and flows down further to irrigate the rice and banana fields. Near the Malaimel Nambi, a statue of a deity called Sangili Boothathar is worshipped by the community from the nearby villages. Two contrasting cultures seem to conduct their religious customs to their hill top deities in an amicable fashion.

Nambi Kovil is located in the middle of dry evergreen forest. Among the many rare plants found here are medicinal plants such as *Decalepis arayalpathra* and *Begonia floccifera*. 'Siddhars', who were well versed about the herbs of health and medicinal significance, are believed to have flocked to these hills.

Nambiar river, on both the banks, is lined with



R Ganesan

Nambi Kovil



mango, naval, pungam, illupai whose magnificent canopy is interlocked by the branches and woody climbers such as 'Aanaipuli'. The boulders found in the fast flowing Nambiar is perhaps the only habitat for *Indotristichia tirunelveliana*, a small aquatic plant anchored firmly. The forest around the temple supports arboreal animals such as Thevangu (slender loris) and the Hanuman manthi (common langur) apart from birds, amphibians and insects.

Serenity provides the ideal ambience to those who seek to experience unison with the mountains. Agasthyamalai encompassing the Thirukurungudi forests is known as abode for the great souls like Agasthya, Gorakkar and several other siddhars. Hence it is hardly surprising that the dense forests and peaks of Thirukurungudi far away from hustle bustle of the human dominated landscape attracted Nambi, whose main abode is in Thirukurungudi, eight km at the foothills of these forests. The Thirumalai Nambi

presides in the forests and devotees either walk or use vehicles to reach this temple. The other four Nambi's incarnations are located around Thirukurungudi village at foothills. Each of these are unique postures of Nambi – the Ninra Nambi (Standing posture), the Irundha Nambi (Sitting posture), the Kidandha Nambi (Sleeping posture), and the Thiruparkadal Nambi (on the banks of Nambiar within the village). Thiru Ramanuja Acharya, a well known Vaishnavite saint is known to have visited these temples.

As with any Vaishnavite temple, last Saturdays of all the Tamil months are considered sacred and thousands of devotees throng the temple. The entire Puratassi month and Pournami day of Chitthirai month are of special significance. Nambi Kovil is an important stopover for thousands of pilgrims and tourists, who visit the landscape. In the past, with a smaller population and limited commutation facilities there was little damage to the surrounding

forests. Now, drastic change in the lifestyle has started to take toll on the forest. Today polythene, liquor bottles, and leftover of sacrificial fowls, goats and food items are common sight than leaf-litter in the forests and the river near the temple. The forest around Thirumalai Nambi temple is not only known as the abode for numerous gods and holy souls but also is home for several rare plants and animals and the river Nambiar, instrumental to bring wealth and prosperity in the downstream villages. Hence, it will be a divine injustice if pilgrims continue to pollute and destroy the inseparably interlinked Malaimel Nambi Kovil Thirukurungudi forest - the insignia of culture and biodiversity. Pilgrims should co-operate with the Forest Department in maintaining cleanliness and tranquillity of the habitat that supports divinity and biodiversity.

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# Tales from wilderness

## Mystery of the disappearing spiders

I was trying to photograph water skitters when I noticed a white striped spider on a wet rock. Though it appeared to be waiting to make a kill I did not pay much attention to it as my camera was trying to capture the territorial

fight between the skitters and water beetles. Unsuccessful at my attempts, I wanted to try my luck at the spider and noticed it was gone. Not putting too much thought on it, we continued our trek down when my colleague,

Seshadri, stopped at a rivulet. He spotted a large spider on a coconut sized rock some fifteen meters away. The rock resembled a small 'island' being surrounded by water on all sides by at least three meters. Looking through the binoculars, I noticed a very large 'roundish' brown spider, different from the one I had seen earlier but positioned the same way - close to water and appearing to be waiting to strike. Seshadri and I walked slowly towards it. We lost sight of the spider when Seshadri was distracted by a frog with yellow markings on its leg. After he was done identifying the frog we re-focused our attention back to the spider and alas – it was gone. It was puzzling because the spider had nowhere to go. We looked around and it was not to be seen. Could it be hiding under water? Losing hope to find the individual, we thought there should be similar spiders on other rocks. We started looking at larger rocks and were relieved to see, not one, but two. I walked up to it to get a closer look when one of the spiders did what I had expected it to do – solve the mystery of the disappearing spiders. With ease, it crawled into water with a bubble of air on its back. I presume that it can use the air on its back to breath under water. I had never seen a spider do that in the field though I recall watching a documentary on TV about diving spiders in Amazon. Looking around I saw a spider with a stripe dive into water too. It was indeed sensational to see the forest throw up surprises such as these.



The striped spider just about to do the disappearing act

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## Common palm civet and an uncommon sight

It was well past ten at night and I was riding the Yamaha with Allwin in pillion. We were carrying out the nocturnal animal survey from Papanasam check post to Mundanthurai to see the impact of the SMK festival on nocturnal animals.

Close to reaching the Lower camp dam, in the not-so-bright lights of the bike, we could faintly see a civet like animal. A closer, more intense look revealed it to be a common palm civet. To our surprise and excitement, there were three little ones trailing behind the adult. It did not take a rocket scientist to realize they were young pups. These tiny pups were

probably blinded by the light and were the prettiest little pups we both had seen! We quietly observed without any movement and did not pull out the camera that was tucked because of light drizzle. In a few moments, the pups, uttering a faint growl started approaching the bike! I do not know if they were curious or that they were trying to intimidate us! Never had I seen such behavior from a civet which usually is quick in slipping away on seeing people. Now, the adult, as if to pull the pups back began growling. The growl grew harsher as it came to pull the pups one by one away. I could now pull out the camera but was only able to record the

parting growls of the civets as they scrambled away into the dense thickets. I do not have a picture on my hard disc. I do have one in my mind and so has Allwin for sure. This encounter of the cute little pups trying to scare us away will not be erased for some considerable time.

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# Research Highlights

## Small mammals of the rainforest



Malabar spiny dormouse in the canopy

The forests of Kakachi are a heterogeneous and complex habitat matrix. There are primary forests with towering giants, secondary regenerating patches that resemble montane sholas and regions with only the economically important canopy trees removed. Patterns of vertical stratification and canopy utilization by non-volant small mammals were analysed across this habitat. In all, eight species were recorded of which three were mainly or exclusively arboreal. The community can be classified into three groups in relation to their vertical activity. Firstly, the terrestrial shrews, mice and rats, a second group comprising scansorial species of the genus *Rattus* that mainly use the ground and under storey and lastly, an arboreal group of squirrels and rodents. Community composition and relative abundance of species in the different vertical strata were dissimilar, with a general reduction of species in the upper layers. Results indicate that structural changes in rain forest habitat by selection-felling and clear-felling change community composition but they do not seem to alter greatly the specific patterns of vertical habitat utilization. The White-bellied wood rat dominated the community at ground level across all habitats and malabar spiny dormouse was most often found in the canopy. These two species are important seed predators and this differential habitat utilization could be a mechanism to avoid competition. Unlike the Neo-tropics and the Orient, the rainforests of the Western Ghats are similar to the African wet forests in being species poor for non-volant small mammals, which maybe due to geographic isolation and historic habitat disturbance and fragmentation.

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## Vaagaikulam- tragedy averted

On October 1<sup>st</sup> this year, Vaagaikulam tank, the heronry discovered by ATREE in 2008, came under a direct threat, when a contractor armed with an order from the forest department started felling the trees inside the tank. The Nanalkulam Green Brigade, a voluntary group comprising exclusively of children, alerted the local people and the administration took notice of the people's protest and issued a ban on cutting. Six trees were already cut by then. Over the next four days the cutters who had camped in the tank set fire to the trees resulting in the loss of more trees until a court stay on the cutting was obtained on 4<sup>th</sup> evening. By then, the harvested trees were collected and loaded in a lorry by the contractor's men leaving behind a few logs. It was possible to stop the felling due to the cooperation of local people, prominent individuals from the landscape, forest department, the village administrative officer, the block development officer, the Tahsildhar of Ambasamudram and the collector. The media highlighted the issue immediately and that caught the attention of

public and there was overwhelming protest against the cutting. What next? Vaagaikulam has already been proposed as a conservation reserve and the forest department along with the local people and district administration should work towards this. The heronry can be protected only with the help of local communities and they need to benefit from it. The contractor who has paid the amount to the government has to be compensated. The local college and university should use this as a study centre for their life science students. Most importantly, the trees in the tank are getting old and some fresh planting should be done at the earliest.



A scene after the contractors cut and set ablaze some trees in Vaagaikulam

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## SMK 2011-fostering local conservation leadership in the landscape



Leaders of tomorrow

Preceding the 5<sup>th</sup> annual ATREE - SMK campaign, after intense debates and brainstorming sessions, the core-team

unanimously decided to pass on the mantle of leading the campaign to the local stakeholders, namely the Forest Department

(FD), the District Administration, the local conservation oriented NGOs viz. Swasam, academic institutions and the Police Department in a staggered way. Thus, the 2011 campaign was kicked off with a 'Stakeholder's training cum capacity building workshop' organized in Mundanthurai FD campus on 23<sup>rd</sup> July. Twenty one students and local NGO representatives were given a hands-on training to monitor, manage and control the impact of the annual Adi Amavasya festival on local biodiversity using the various standardized protocols developed by us over the last four years. After the training, all the participants were involved in the actual monitoring and impact control exercises. With the locals enthusiastically participating and spreading the word among their neighbors and peers, a small but significant step has been taken towards passing the mantle of conservation to those who are going to matter in the long run.

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## Birdwatching workshop

A half day birdwatching workshop was organized on 27<sup>th</sup> Oct for interested people from the Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi districts. A short introduction to birds, landscapes and issues facing wetland

conservation was made followed by a trip to Vaagaikulam heronry. In spite of heavy rain some fourteen participants came and enthusiastically participated in the event. For many, this was the first exposure to birds in

the wild. The next trip to Tirupadamarathur is planned in the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of November. People interested can contact Mr. M. Mathivanan.



## Snippets:

- A pack of 15 wild dogs, trying to hunt down a sambar was spotted around Kakachi on 30<sup>th</sup> August by the ATREE frog team while sampling frogs in the forest. On the same night a porcupine and a snake, suspected to be a Ceylon cat snake were also sighted by them.
- Comb Ducks were common around Singampatti between Jun to Sept often seen in flocks ranging from 15-60 at inundated paddy.
- Ganesh and Prashanth, sighted a rusty-spotted cat, the smallest of all cats in the world, amidst a rocky scrub near Singampatti on 8<sup>th</sup> Sep.
- A great stone plover and about 15 Ruff and Reeves were sighted at Sivagalai tank, Thoothukudi district by ATREE wetland bird team on 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept.
- Thomas Mathibalan, a bird watcher from Sivagalai, mentioned that the Armugamangalam tank, an important wetland that holds water during the dry season for birds, went dry after a gap of 30 odd years. This was because water was pumped out of it to Thoothukudi city.
- The broad-tailed grass bird, a known resident in the hills of KMTR, was seen near the Ooth tea estate by Seshadri and Prashanth on Sept 9<sup>th</sup>.
- Migrant grey wagtails were seen at Nalmukh by the first week of September.
- A dead ruddy mongoose was seen near Manimuthar forest check post on 2<sup>nd</sup> Sept by Seshadri and Allwin. It bore injuries on the face and had died in the wee hours of the morning, possibly run over by the bus to the estate.
- A dead brown mongoose was seen in Manimuthar area by Seshadri and John on 27<sup>th</sup> September. Though it appeared to be road killed, there were no visible injuries.
- A porcupine, mouse deer with two fawns, an un identified shield tail, a montane trinket and an un-identified civet were seen by Seshadri and John

while doing field work in Kodayar between 28<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>, September.

- Members of the ATREE team trekked on the old Kandamparai forest route to Manjolai from the plains. They walked a little over 20 km and saw many frogs, birds and two spiders which dive underwater. They also encountered evidence of leopards and tigers several times along the route.
- The north east monsoon set in vigorously on 25<sup>th</sup> Oct. By 31<sup>st</sup> Oct, 255 mm of rainfall had been recorded at the ACCC.
- People of Nanalkulam, near the Vaagaikulam heronry celebrated a cracker free Deepavali.
- Black necked Ibis, darters and little cormorants have begun to nest at Vaagaikulam.



Thomas Mathibalan

An albino Spot-billed Pelican was sighted by Thomas Mathibalan at Sivagalai tank



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