



Vaavubhali, a Traditional Festival for Remembering Ancestors

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Photo Essay

Abstract

Remembering ancestors is a part of tradition in every society. In this article, we present the importance of a traditional festival called **vaavubhali** in the context of ecological and economical services rendered. The festival honours deceased souls and also popularizes the planting of ornamental, medicinal and timber yielding plants. The changing scenario is also depicted.

வாவுபலி – முன்னோரை நினைவுகூரும் விழா
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அனைத்து சமூகங்களும் தங்கள் முன்னோரை நினைவுகூருவது மரபு. வாவுபலி என்னும் இவ்விழா சுற்றுச்சூழல் மற்றும் பொருளாதார மேம்பாட்டில் வகிக்கும் பங்கு பற்றி இக்கட்டுரை வாயிலாக ஆய்வு செய்ய விழைகின்றோம். இந்த விழா இறந்து போனவர்களின் ஆன்மாக்களுக்கு மரியாதை செலுத்துவதோடு அழகு மருத்துவ மற்றும் மர வேலைகளுக்கு பயன்படும் தாவரங்களை நட்டு வளர்க்கவும் தூண்டுகிறது. மாறிவரும் இவ்விழாவின் தன்மையையும் இக்கட்டுரை காண்பிக்கின்றது

Introduction

The South Indian Dravidian communities are known for their high reverence for ancestors. Every year, during the Dark moon day named **adi amavasai** (Tamil) or **karkidaka vaavu** (Malayalam), Dravidian Hindus throng the river and sea banks to offer respect for their ancestors. This festival is called **adi amavasai** in Tamil as it falls in the Tamil month of **adi** and as **karkidaka vaavu** in Malayalam as it falls in the Malayalam month of **karkidakam**. Both the Tamil and Malayalam calendars are based on the solar cycle, and the month of **adi** corresponds to the time between mid-July to mid-August on the Gregorian calendar (Fuller 1980, Subramuniaswami 2007).

In Kuzhithurai, a small town located in the Kanniyakumari district of India, this ritual is performed as a festival under the name **Vaavubhali**, hosted by the Kuzhithurai municipal corporation on the banks of the river Kodayar (Figure 1). As the locality is also closer to the state of Kerala, the festival attracts both Malayalis and Tamilians. Though this festival, of late, has evolved into a local fair, its speciality lies in the importance accorded to local agriculture products and plants (Franco 2010).

The photo essay

The concept originated from an informal discussion between the two authors. Being natives of the region, both the authors have a long standing emotional relationship with the fair, which helped in understanding the issues quite easily. This photo essay is the first step towards a series of research studies planned with the fair. Since photo essays are powerful research tools to communicate complex information (McClatchey *et al.* 2005, Savo *et al.* 2009); we expect to draw attention towards the an-

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Figure 1. People gathering on the banks of Kodayar river (South India) to honor their ancestors.



Figure 2. An elderly person kneeling before a Dravidian priest during rituals at the Kodayar river, South India.

thropological and ecological significance of the fair. A Canon EOS 400D was used for photographing the events. The 18-55mm kit lens and a 75-300mm zoom lens were used, as warranted by the situation. Oral consent was obtained before photographing the people and informal interviews were conducted with the owners of the nursery gardens and Mrs. Delphin, an ex-chairman of the Kuzhithurai municipality to collect the relevant information. We began photographing at around 05:00 A.M. and continued till 12:00 noon. The whole process was done according to a story line conceived well in advance. The plants were identified using relevant floras such as Gamble (1915 – 1936); Nair and Henry (1983) and Mathew (1991) and their nomenclature was updated by referring to www.tropicos.org. Sometimes, many species belonging to a single genus were found to be in use as substitutes. In such cases, the genus name alone is provided.

Honouring ancestors

At the dawn, male heirs of the deceased gather on the banks of the river Kodayar and perform rituals as per the guidance of non-brahmin priests, to honor the dead (Figure 2). A traditional lamp called **kuthuvilaku** is lit and offerings of *Musa acuminata* X *balbisiana* Colla., *Dioscorea* spp., *Cynodon dactylon* (L.) Pers. (**aruvampul**), *Saccharum officinarum* L. (**karumbu**), *Phaseolus vulgaris* L. (**payiru**), *Cocos nucifera* L. (**thenku**), *Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lam. (**plavu**), *Sesamum indicum* L. (**ellu**), *Vigna radiata* (L.) R. Wilczek (**cherupayiru**), *Coccinia grandis* (L.) Voigt (**kovaka**), *Oryza sativa* L. (**ari**), *Amaranthus* spp. (**keerai**), *Momordica charantia* L. (**paavakai**) and jaggery are made (Figures 3-6). After brief rituals, the priest hands over the **aruvampul** to the heir who bears it on his ears. He then kneels before the priest



Figure 3. A man selling ingredients for the offerings at the Kodayar river, South India.

who places the offerings folded in a banana leaf, on to the head of the heir (Figures 7-10). The heir then proceeds to the river for immersing the offerings (Figures 11 & 12). During immersion, the heir turns to the opposite direction of his walk and takes a dip while simultaneously throwing the banana leaf with the offerings over his back (Figure 13). Traditionally, an heir who had just performed rituals, used to purchase/barter seeds from the local farmers who used to throng the fair. The belief is that such seeds would be blessed by the ancestral spirits to provide a good yield. However due to the erosion of traditional agriculture in the district, the farmers selling seeds or farm produces are



Figure 4. The ingredients for offering at the Kodayar river, South India.



Figure 5. As seen here, indigenous flowers could also form a part of the rituals at the Kodayar river, South India.



Figure 6. Offerings waiting for buyers (heirs) at the Kodayar river, South India.



Figure 7. Grass being handed over to the heir at the Kodayar river, South India.



Figure 8. Grass being tied to the fingers at the Kodayar river, South India.



Figure 9. Heirs kneeling before the priest at the Kodayar river, South India.



Figure 10. Priest places the offerings on the heir's head at the Kodayar river, South India.



Figure 11. Men proceeding towards the Kodayar river (South India) for immersing the offering.



Figure 12. Men about to immerse the offering at the Kodayar river, South India.



Figure 13. An heir takes a dip while throwing the offering over his back in the Kodayar river, South India.



Figure 14. Farmers selling local vegetables were popular once at the **Vaavubhali** fair in Kuzhithurai, Kanniyakumari district, India. A deserted farmer is seen waiting for takers.



Figure 15. Plant nurseries make quick business during the **Vaavubhali** fair in Kuzhithurai, Kanniyakumari district, India.

rarely seen at the venue (Figure 14). But the practice has evolved in such a way that both the heirs and casual visitors purchase ornamental, fruit or medicinal plants from plant nurseries for planting in their gardens or farms.

Ecological and economical importance of the fair

The mushrooming nursery gardens in and around the locality bear testimony to the fact that plants continue to be a major attraction every year (Figure 15). The nursery gardens around look forward to the fair which marks the peak of their season. There are at least five permanent nursery gardens in the vicinity of the fair. Our interviews show that there were local farmers selling crop plants even before the arrival of such gardens and the establishment of such gardens only marked the beginning of commercial, organized plant sale. Both indigenous and exotic species of fruit and timber value are sold during the fair (Table 1). Besides, indigenous cultivars of *A. heterophyllus* (**koozhan & varika**) and *Mangifera indica* L. (**kilichundan, kaaraali, mylapore, vellarivarika, chenkavari & anapulichi**) are also sold. At least 20,000 saplings of the above mentioned cultivars are sold every year which is a 20 fold increase from the total number of a mere 1,000 for all species that were sold in 1980 (Franco 2010). People generally favor

hybrid and exotic species - a trend that is slowly reversing. Hybrid plants are also priced higher which means better revenue for the plant sellers. These plant sellers also sell medicinal plants such as *Plumbago* spp., *Cos-tus* spp., *Acorus calamus* L., *Bacopa monnieri* (L.) Wettst., etc. However, the rose plant (*Rosa* spp.) remains an all time favorite with its number alone exceeding 20,000 plants every year (Franco 2010). Besides the plant sellers, economically poor rural folks can also be seen selling pots, fancy items, indigenous sweets, pickles, sugarcane, toys, etc. (Figures 16 & 17).

The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) played a crucial role in popularizing the fair by emphasizing agriculture. The YMCA initiated the practice of showcasing farm produce during the fair and giving away prizes for the best produce, a practice that is continued even today by the municipal corporation (Figure 18). Earlier, the state government of Tamil Nadu used to provide subsidized tree saplings to the public. At present, subsidized coconut saplings alone are available in the fair. Every season, the municipal corporation allots at least two stalls for the agriculture department for showcasing their products and technologies. However, the state forest department is conspicuously absent at the fair.



Figure 16. An artisan selling pots at the **Vaavubhali** fair in Kuzhithurai, Kanniyakumari district, India.

Table 1. Fruit and timber yielding plants commonly sold by the plant sellers during **vaavubhali**. Plants known in the locality by their common English names are identified below with an *.

Name of the species	Local name	Name of the species	Local name
<i>Acacia mangium</i> Willd.	Mangium*	<i>Myristica fragrans</i> Houtt.	Jaadhi
<i>Achras zapota</i> L.	Sapota*	<i>Nephelium lappaceum</i> L.	Rambutan*
<i>Anacardium occidentale</i> L.	Andi, munthiri	<i>Olea europaea</i> L.	Olive*
<i>Annona muricata</i> L.	Malamunthiri	<i>Persea americana</i> Mill.	Butter fruit*
<i>Annona reticulata</i> L.	Bullock's heart*	<i>Phyllanthus acidus</i> (L.) Skeels	Seema nelli
<i>Annona squamosa</i> L.	Munthiri	<i>Pimenta dioica</i> (L.) Merr.	Allspice*
<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i> Lam.	Plavu	<i>Pouteria campechiana</i> (Kunth) Baehni	Egg fruit*
<i>Averrhoa carambola</i> L.	Star fruit*	<i>Psidium guajava</i> L.	Koyya, peraikaa
<i>Carica papaya</i> L.	Pappali	<i>Punica granatum</i> L.	Maadhulam
<i>Cassia fistula</i> L.	Kanikonna	<i>Saraca asoca</i> (Roxb.) De Wilde	Ashokam
<i>Citrus limon</i> (L.) Osbeck	Elumichai	<i>Sesbania grandiflora</i> (L.) Pers.	Agathi
<i>Flacourtia inermis</i> Roxb.	Lovi-lovi*	<i>Swietenia mahagoni</i> (L.) Jacq.	Mahagony*
<i>Garcinia mangostana</i> L.	Mangusteen*	<i>Syzygium aromaticum</i> (L.) Merr. & L.M. Perry	Krampu
<i>Grevillea robusta</i> A. Cunn. ex R. Br.	Silver oak*	<i>Syzygium cumini</i> (L.) Skeels	Naaval
<i>Limonia acidissima</i> L.	Vizhampazham	<i>Tamarindus indica</i> L.	Puli
<i>Mangifera indica</i> L.	Maavu	<i>Tectona grandis</i> L. f.	Theku
<i>Michelia champaca</i> L.	Shenpagam		
<i>Moringa oleifera</i> Lam.	Murunga		



Figure 17. An elderly woman selling pickled gooseberries at the **Vaavubhali** fair in Kuzhithurai, Kanniyakumari district, India.



Figure 18. Farm produces displayed at the **Vaavubhali** fair in Kuzhithurai, Kanniyakumari district, India.



Figure 19. Fancy shops of this kind have largely displaced the rural artisans at the **Vaavubhali** fair.



Figure 20. Prime space is usurped by the merry-go-round operators at the Vaavubhali fair.

Conclusion

Besides the environmental benefits offered, the fair is also a major source of recreation and revenue for the people of Kanyakumari district. However, what began as a farmers' fair has now transformed into a commercial one with farm produce being absent except in the display section. The central stage once occupied by the famous plant nursery gardens are now occupied by the fancy good sellers, merry-go-round operators and automobile dealers (Figures 19 & 20). It is time for the state government of Tamil Nadu to harness the multiple potentials of this fair. The forest department should utilise **Vaavubhali** for selling subsidized tree saplings which could go a long way to increase the tree cover of the district.

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