

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH RELIGIOUS ECOSOPHY: A Case Study of *Tau Kaavu*, Kerala

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Abstract: This research paper explores religious ecosophy as one of the viable reparative means to the present global environmental crisis. The paper critiques Lynn White's criticism of Western Christianity as bearing the moral burden of anthropocentrism, which led to the ecological emergency, and traces the ecologically-aligned history of Christianity, especially from the latter half of the twentieth century to the present. Guattari's and Naess' notion of "ecosophy," Thomas Berry's ideas on "eco-spirituality," and Madhav Gadgil's conception of the "sacred groves" are used to form the theoretical framework for the arguments put forth here. Locating the formative influences of *Tau Kaavu* in the inter-religious frameworks of Kerala, the paper projects it as an example of religious ecosophy and eco-spirituality that also caters to the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 envisioned by the United Nations in 2015. The significance and scope of the article lie in exploring the prospects of ecosophy in regards to global religions that can help produce ecologically allied ideologies and aid sustainable development.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Ecosophy, Eco-spirituality, Green Christianity, Sacred Grove, Sustainable Development Goals

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development has become a pressing priority for the survival of the fast-disintegrating Earth, suffering irrevocable consequences of the unbridled scientific and technological expansion coupled with the insecurities of globalisation and the industrial revolutions. Unlike power and profit that drive technocratic market societies and the corporate world, leading to consumption-driven lifestyles and the widening inequality between the affluent and the deprived, religion may be relied upon as a more tenable alternative to attain sustainability. This emanates from religion's clarion call for a more integral and holistic development compared to that of its scientific or technological counterparts. The affirmative interventions that religion can promote through all-inclusive partnerships at the rudimentary levels confirm its possibility as a factor inducing sustainable transformation for peace and prosperity of the planet as well as its people.

However, Christianity has been frequently accused of propagating anthropocentric ideals that have proven detrimental to Earth's ecosystems. Lynn White's essay "The Historical Roots of Our Environmental Crisis" explicates this argument. This research article problematises White's claims of Christianity's anti-ecological stances by tracing its historical trajectory with regard to ecosophy and eco-spirituality. Initially mapping the etymological roots of both, the researchers proceed to examine Christianity's – particularly Catholic Church's – conscious engagements that have promoted eco-spiritual values and wisdom amongst Catholics worldwide. Each historical juncture of administrative and/or pragmatic action of the Church is explored for its possibility to endorse an all-encompassing holistic perspective of the universe, rather than substituting it with anthropocentric values.

The essay proceeds to unearth the grassroots-level intervention and transformation that religion can bring about in sustainable development through the case study of *Tau Kaavu*, a project envisioned by a Capuchin friar, Bobby Jose, and executed in 40 cents of land at Mulavukaad, Kochi, Kerala,

India. *Tau Kaavu* is examined in terms of its religiously-inspired design, its position and probable influences from Kerala's inter-religious, socio-cultural, and geographical framework, and its relevance in the sustainable development paradigm. As religion is a manifestation of the constant dialogue between the sacred and the secular, *Tau Kaavu* is investigated for its dimensions that may connect the religiously sacred with the ecologically secular with reference to the ecologically and socially sensitive situation that prevails in Kerala.

2. Ecosophy and Eco-spirituality in the Religious Framework

The term ecosophy is a neologism that arises from ecological philosophy proposed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, hailed as the father of deep ecology. He conceptualised ecosophy as "a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium" (Drengson and Inoue 8). Naess explains ecosophy as a personal philosophy, with an emphasis on *sofia* or the wisdom of realising an ecological equilibrium. Unlike this definition that classifies human beings and nature as opposing binaries, French poststructuralist philosopher and activist Félix Guattari defines ecosophy as an interconnected merging of individual, social, and environmental spheres, where social relationships, human subjectivity, and nature form a complex whole of interdependent functioning (264).

Though ecosophy is primarily a pragmatic philosophy, it is realised through various modes of institutional and cultural frameworks that connect the human mind, society, and environment. One such framework is religion, as religion has the capability to instil a "Theanthropocosmic vision"¹ in its followers. "A Planetary Ethics that follows the Theanthropocosmic vision values the material world and the biotic community having intrinsic values and moral rights as

¹The Theanthropocosmic vision proposes that God created the cosmos and all its beings. Human beings are entrusted with the task of protecting earth, the common home of all earthlings, who are inextricably interconnected and interdependent (See Nandhikkara, "Theanthropocosmic Vision of the Holy Bible," 389-404).

they are created by God” (Nandhikkara, “Planetary Ethics,” 124-25). Religion, being an influencing factor that can trigger mass affirmative action concerning the planet, may be integrated into the philosophy of ecosophy, thus to religious ecosophy, the focus of this paper.

Inextricably interwoven with religious ecosophy is the term eco-spirituality, referring to the spiritual dimension of universal relationships that interlink human beings as a mere strand in the evolving universe. It is an ecologically-oriented spiritual outlook that emerges from a philosophical reading of deep ecology and ecofeminism. Though eco-spirituality does not cater to any particular religion, every religion imbibes eco-spiritual ideas and practices into their tradition, voluntarily or otherwise. While indigenous peoples and institutionalised religions alike practise eco-spirituality, it is also evoked in the re-interpretations of religious scriptures. Eco-theologian Thomas Berry has elaborated on Christianity’s necessity to instil the idea of the universe constituting “the sacred community par excellence” (34) as the basis of Christian eco-spiritual traditions. He further connects the future of Christianity with the Christian acceptance of their responsibility for Earth’s fate (35), which can further eco-spiritual actions within the Church. This research article tries to read into the role of religious ecosophy and an expansion of eco-spiritual values as manifested in *Tau Kaavu*.

3. Lynn White’s Accusations of Christianity

In 1967, only five years after the publication of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, Lynn White, an American historian, published “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” in which he accused Christianity of being “the most anthropocentric religion that world has ever seen” (1205). He contended that the Western Christian worldviews endorsed unsustainable and blind exploitation of nature by enthroning human beings as its owners; this ideology, coupled with modern technology and the industrial revolution, brought forth the environmental crisis. For Christianity to recover from this “huge burden of

guilt" (1206), White also proposed a transformation of the Western anthropocentric Christianity by an alternative Christian perspective that should adopt eco-friendly Asian religious rituals (1207).

While White does admit that industrialisation and the democratised use of science coupled with technology have led to the environmental crisis, he also intersperses them with religion. "Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion" (1204). He also extends it to accuse Western Christianity of substituting pagan animism with anthropocentric superiority and sees the Judeo-Christian Story of Creation as having given humans the impetus to mindlessly use science and technology to his/her desired effect. "Western science was cast in a matrix of Christian theology" (1206). There are two flaws in Lynn White's allegation: veneration of Asian religions as completely eco-friendly and the objectification of Western Christianity to bear the sole moral responsibility in bringing about the contemporary environmental crisis.

The Asian religions, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Taoism do have well-established eco-sensitive traditions and rituals. However, very often, they are not realised/practised in ecologically viable terms by the followers of these traditions. For instance, the river Ganges in India remains one of the most polluted in the country, despite its status as a goddess in Hindu mythology. This evokes the necessity to distinguish conceptualised religious ideals and their pragmatic realisation, whichever religion might be of concern. White blankets Christianity as its orthodox Western version, while Christianity –as huge as it is – is open to multiple interpretations and practices, depending on several cultural, geographic, and other factors that shape the religion. The following sections deal with the alternative aspects of Christianity and its eco-sensitive endeavours unaddressed by White.

3.1 St Francis of Assisi: The Ecologist before Ecology

As White himself avers, the term *ecology* was first used in English in 1873 (1201). Centuries before this conscientisation of environmental activism, St Francis of Assisi lived the life of a true ecologist in thirteenth-century Italy. His life incorporated principles of ecosophy and eco-spirituality long before they were academically instituted. Episodes from his life narrate incidents of his preaching to birds, taming a ferocious wolf, and addressing creatures of nature “Brother” or “Sister,” realising the inherent and divine kinship that equated human beings with other living beings (Nothwehr 90). Ironically, in his essay, White proposes St Francis as “the patron saint for ecologists” (1207). Not only is St Francis from the very West, which White criticised, but he is also a celebrated saint with contemporary relevance with regards to adopting a sustainable lifestyle.

3.2 Second Vatican Council and Rejuvenation of Christianity

Pope John XXIII initiated the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council to introspect the Catholic Church’s functioning and update its identity to cater to the fast-changing world of the twentieth century. The Council met at St Peter’s Basilica in Rome in four sessions from 1962 to 1965 (before White’s essay was published) and led to many revolutionary changes in the doctrines and practices of the Church, amongst which inclusivity of laypeople irrespective of religion, inter-religious dialogues, and the acceptance of religious freedom and tolerance were cardinal. Though environmental concerns were not the focus of the Council, it cannot be ignored as a mere conference within the Church; it is rightly described as “the most important religious event of the twentieth century” (O’Malley 1), holding relevance even in the present times.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 adopted by the United Nations in 2015 for peace and prosperity for the planet and its people is premised on healthy global partnerships. Inclusivity and open discussions are key to building these partnerships, to which the Second Vatican Council opened doors. The Council achieved the goal of opening the sacred space to incorporate the secular. It may be

seen as the Catholic Church's initial steps towards being part of an all-encompassing humanity on whose shoulders rest the global tasks of ending discrimination and poverty, fending for better health, education, and other amenities, and enabling stable economic growth without compromising the environmental concerns.

3.3 Green Christianity and Its Mission

Responding to the ecological crisis that worsened during the latter half of the twentieth century, several Christian denominations made the clarion call to align themselves on ecologically-viable terms. Thus, was initiated *Green Christianity*, a version of Christianity that emphasised the human role from ownership to stewardship of nature. It refers to the various ecological initiatives organised and executed by Christian churches across the globe to tackle environmental crises and help build healthier Earth. However, Green Christianity may be better comprehended by placing it within the framework of eco-spirituality.

Religion may be interpreted as the most eligible tool to spread eco-spiritual ideals through cross-cultural planning and inter-religious dialogues. This is because

there is an understanding that religion not only broadens the conversation beyond discussing environmental issues in terms of economics, political legislation, or scientific analysis, but also that at the heart of spirituality is an encounter with the sacred: an intuition of the wondrous mystery in the power of life and being. Ecospirituality is a manner of speaking about this kind of religious experience that is awakening, slowly and unevenly, within the human community (Encyclopedia.com).

Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and scholar on world religions, asserted the pivotal position that the Church can adorn in promoting eco-spirituality amongst contemporaneous religious networks. "The Church could be a powerful force in bringing about the healing of a distraught Earth. The Church could provide an integrating re-interpretation of our New Story

of the Universe. In this manner, it could renew religion in its primary expression as celebration, as ecstatic delight in existence" (53). Green Christian initiatives have taken forth this vision of eco-spirituality, and have actively been engaged in actualising them.

3.4 The Papal Encyclicals and their Impacts

Catholicism, the largest denomination amongst the Christian churches, was guided to principles of ecology through encyclicals issued by the Papacy at various points in time. What was begun by popes John XXIII and Paul VI was continued by their successors. Pope John Paul II's papal addresses "Peace with God, the Creator, Peace with All of Creation" (1989) and "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility" (1990) are particularly inclined toward ecological concerns. More recent and influential has been the encyclical of Pope Francis, "*Laudato Si' mi' Signore*" ("*Praise Be to You, My Lord*"). In the encyclical, the Pope advocates each living human being on Earth to respond to the environmental crisis that is worsening each day due to mindless human exploitation.

Taking inspiration from his namesake St Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis falls back to the Franciscan idea of the existence of an inseparable bond between "the concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and internal peace" (10). Expressing hope in the younger generation, he appeals for the whole of humanity to come forward "to seek a sustainable and integral development" (12) through lesser use of plastic, paper, fossil fuels, reducing consumption and wastage, listening to others (especially the underprivileged), living in harmony, and getting engaged in societal and political concerns. Calling sins against the environment *ecocide*, he has also initiated discussions on the "spiritual costs of ecological wrongdoing" (Catholic Register).

In what later came to be known as the *Laudato Si' Movement*, the Catholics worldwide initiated various environmental preservation and promotion models. At various levels, beginning from the local parishes and at various ages of the

community, steps have been taken to create awareness about the impending environmental crises, the need to address climate change, and practical steps towards the same. Numerous Catholic organisations like the *Catholic Climate Covenant*, *Christian Vegetarian Association*, and *Earth Ministry* have played significant roles in spreading the eco-spiritual perspectives of Catholicism to the wider world. These initiatives by the Catholic Church point toward a more informed and holistic realisation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals through the involvement of religious ideologies and influences. However, the climate change that has engrossed the present world in an unprecedented crisis of an apocalyptic seizure calls forth not just intra-religious models of sustainable living but inter-religious cooperation that should take place at the grassroots level to reaffirm the varied approaches, visions, models, and tools to regain the Earth, one step at a time.

4. *Tau Kaavu*: An Eco-spiritual Model

While the SDGs call for global partnerships that can bring prosperity and peace to the people and the planet, it remains necessary to inculcate the sustainable ideals of development from the local level to the national and international levels to achieve the desired ends. This section focuses on an ethnographic case study of *Tau Kaavu*, a project executed on 40 cents of land at Mulavukaad, Kochi. A *Miyawaaki* forest (a specialised Japanese way of natural forest restoration in degraded land), a pond, vegetable garden, thatched huts, a gathering space around a banyan tree, and more fill the place. *Tau Kaavu* is interrogated for its religious, particularly Christian influences, positioning in the eco-spiritual religious traditions of Kerala, and relevance with regard to sustainable development, all within the framework of geographical location and its peculiarities.

Tau Kaavu has been ideated by Bobby Jose Kattikkad, a Capuchin priest, literary theologian, and author in Malayalam, as a sacred space to de-stress the human mind, body, and soul,

enliven companionship in times of estrangement, simultaneously preserving the environment, its flora and fauna. It is a crowd-funded project executed with the aid of the local community to preserve the natural habitat, promote organic cultivation, and enjoy nature's abundance in a cityscape. The place was formally opened on 15 August 2020. *Tau Kaavu* does not proclaim itself as a religious space; however, a closer scrutiny of the conceptual influences on the formation of such a space cannot preclude influences from the established religious frameworks within Kerala. The most explicit amongst them is Christianity, as vindicated in this section.

The name *Tau* is inspired by the ancient Greek symbol of Tau, signifying life and resurrection. The letter resembles the English letter T, and historically became associated with the sacrificial Cross of Jesus Christ. St Francis used it as a signature in his letters, and his adoption of the Tau Cross as a Franciscan symbol led to its widespread symbolism amongst Franciscan Orders in Christianity. The Franciscan habit is also associated with the Tau, as a friar wearing the habit with outstretched hands resembled the Tau – he became a living Tau (Finnis).

Tau Kaavu's conception is heavily influenced by Saint Francis of Assisi, whose environmental concerns have hugely shaped the sermons and writings of Bobby Jose. In his special message during the feast of St Francis, Bobby Jose said,

Preserving the memory of (Saint) Francis is the need of the burning Earth. . . Francis spoke naively for the earth centuries before ecology was conscientiously studied . . . He asked to set a space apart in the agricultural fields for natural groves (*kaavu*) to develop. He reminded us to live as tenants on Earth and not as its owners (Divine Mercy Daily News).

Bobby Jose spoke of the present Pope, "To adopt the name Francis is not easy, as the name itself is an invocation to responsibility, and a name that converses with the earth . . ." (Divine Mercy Daily News). Considering the impact the name and actions of Pope Francis have created on Bobby Jose (and the Catholic Church at large), the place could also be read as a

parallel interpretation of the *Laudato si'* movement that sprang up post-2015 in various parts of the world.

This Franciscan re-reading of Christianity has considerably impacted the Christian psyche of Catholics (as well as other Christian denominations) in Kerala. It is impossible to divorce the Franciscan connotations of Tau in the conception of *Tau Kaavu*. The implications of the Second Vatican Council that opened the Church for dialogue with the modern world reflect in the actualisation of *Tau Kaavu* as an eco-spiritual space that hails inclusivity as its motto. The ideals of Green Christianity that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century find their explication in the conscious planting of trees, plants, and vegetables that have nurtured a sacred natural habitat in *Tau Kaavu*. Thus, *Tau Kaavu* may also be cited as the new eco-spiritual ethic that sprouts from Catholic ecosophy interpreted to suit the need of present-day Kerala's geographical, cultural, and socio-political milieu.

4.1 *Tau Kaavu* in the Inter-religious Frameworks of Kerala

Located within the plurality of many religious frameworks like Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, pantheistic, and other forms of worship, Kerala's socio-political and cultural milieu have been influenced by the ecosophical philosophies that derive from these faith traditions. This section traces the concept of the sacred grove (*kaavu*) in various religious faiths in Kerala, and its shaping principles that manifest in the realisation of *Tau Kaavu*. The concept of the sacred grove is indigenous to the Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Sufi-Islamic religious beliefs. Madhav Gadgil (Indian ecologist and academic) defines them so: "A legacy of prehistoric traditions of nature conservation, sacred groves are patches of forest that rural communities in the developing world protect and revere as sacrosanct" (48). Such groves are intricately tied with spiritual/religious beliefs, and their ecosystem is hence untouched by humans. Local deities or ancestral spirits are usually venerated in the sacred groves. They exemplify religious ecosophy at its best.

Gadgil has pursued an ecological and sociological study of the history of India's groves and reports the fate of the present groves. Most of the sacred groves maintained by the "ecosystem people"² in various parts of India suffered demolition and deforestation under British rule, as the industrialised administration in Britain looked at the groves as only sources of timber, hydroelectric energy, and other resources. After the British rule, the governmental action led to the formation of the Department of Forestry, which further devastated the sacred groves. However, several sacred groves still have been protected and even newly created by the "ecosystem people," though many have been uprooted from their status as the habitats of spiritual beings/ancestral spirits. Gadgil calls them the "secular groves" (48-57).

Though Gadgil's study is ecological in nature, their intricate relationship with the religious/spiritual bases is also mentioned. "The grove was said to be at the origin of the temple, whose columns were initially trees, and the Christian church which still evokes by the alignment of its pillars, the semi-darkness within it, and the soft coloured light that filters through its stain-glassed windows" (Gadgil and Chandran 183). In Kerala, Hinduism and Islam have explicit religious practices connected to the sacred groves. In Hinduism, the sacred groves are generally linked with the veneration of

²The terms "ecosystem people" and "biosphere people" were initially used by Raymond Dasmann, one of the founders of modern environmentalism. "Ecosystem people" are those who process the resources that they consume through their and their livestock's muscle power. These resources are mostly confined within fifty kilometers within their homesteads, and hence the "ecosystem people" totally understand and appreciate the bounty that nature offers them. "Biosphere people" have access to additional sources of energy (like fossil fuels), which lead them to transport and transform materials for their use. They look at rural locales only as sources of timber, hydroelectric power, or tourist spots, and the "ecosystem people" as cheap labour, or hinderances to their materialistic development (Dasmann 152-161).

female deities or snakes. The places where snakes are venerated are known as *sarpakkavu*, a pristine ecological hive of evergreen flora and fauna where rare snakes are believed to inhabit. In a related instance in Islam, the dead are buried on the premises of the local mosque, in a specially designated geographic zone known as the *pallikkaadu*. Apart from *henna* (*Lawsonia inermis*) that is planted while a dead body is interred, there are no human interventions into this sacred space, which becomes a natural habitat for the life forms around it. *Tau Kaavu* may be considered an extended, broader version of the *sarpakkavu* and the *pallikkaadu*.

However, two major factors distinguish *Tau Kaavu* from the traditional *sarpakkavu* and *pallikkadu*. Firstly, it is completely a human-made grove, unlike the others that are natural patches of land not commercially exploited by humans. While *sarpakkavu* and *pallikkadu* are religious spaces that involuntarily also thrived as natural ecosystems, *Tau Kaavu* is an artificially constructed ecological space that emerged from the concern for disintegrating ecology and human values. The second aspect that makes *Tau Kaavu* distinct is its inclusivity, though the neo-Catholic roots cannot be denied. *Tau Kaavu* welcomes everyone without social barriers like religion, caste, class, gender, or creed. Thomas R. Dunlap writes about a broader meaning of religion connecting it to environmentalism, articulating it thus, "seeing religion not in terms of creeds or denominations but as an expression of humans' need to find a place in the universe" (322). Religious ecosophy is taken a step further in the ideation of *Tau Kaavu*, which becomes a holistic compilation of the religious beliefs in Kerala.

4.2 *Tau Kaavu* and Sustainable Development Goals

This section examines how *Tau Kaavu* may be cited as catering to religious ecosophy and eco-spiritual ideals and as a means of actualising the sustainable development paradigm proposed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030. The thirteenth goal intends to "take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts" (United Nations 25), recognising the

unabating threat to Earth's environment that has been gradually transforming it into an uninhabitable place for all the living species, including human beings. The fifteenth goal, "protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss" (United Nations 27), is more specifically aligned with the making of *Tau Kaavu*. This may be explicated by the three pillars that make up sustainable development: economy, environment, and society (Mensah 9).

The economic aspect of sustainability is highlighted through crowd-funding (any interested volunteer could contribute 1000 rupees, making each of them equal owners of the land thus bought). Registered as a Trust, *Tau Kaavu* is also run by crowd-funded money. Without an authoritarian owner and through equitable partnerships, capital does not prove a hindrance to the functioning of the *Kaavu*. The vegetables produced in the *Kaavu* are distributed among the local public, ensuring their participation in the endeavour. However, there remains a dubious factor concerning the economic and intellectual aspects of *Tau Kaavu*.

Tau Kaavu's definitions of the "ecosystem people" and the "biosphere people" alters from Gadgil's description of the terms. In Gadgil's terms, "ecosystem people" are the real protectors of the sacred groves since they are its benefactors (56). But since the *Kaavu* is a newly created endeavour and not the preservation of an already existing one, actively involving the local public remains a challenge. The *Kaavu* is located in a thickly populated residential area in Mulavukaad, inhabited mostly by lower-middle-class people, who seem to have hardly comprehended the grand eco-spiritual and psychological intentions behind the formation of *Tau Kaavu*. The "biosphere people," in the case of *Tau Kaavu*, do not bear the negative connotations that Gadgil attributes to them. Instead, they are the progressive-spirited, visionary people who have shaped the *Kaavu* and its eco-spiritual values for the planet and its people.

Though it is intended as an equal space for every person who visits, the intellectual gap that separates them rings an uncertain bell about the local public's participation owing to their lack of understanding of the lofty concepts. Moreover, situated in Kochi, *Tau Kaavu* has a high chance of being frequented by the elite to de-stress themselves from their hectic high-end professional atmospheres. The economic gap that would separate the local public from the urban elite who come to *Tau Kaavu* for mental relaxation and spiritual rejuvenation stands as a real obstacle that needs to be bridged. Since the *Kaavu* is in its infancy, these obstacles can possibly be overcome through conscious efforts from the Trust members to conscientise both the "ecosystem people" as well as the "biosphere people" about the holistic intentions of the *Kaavu*, and by engaging in more sessions that would help them intermingle with each other, thus producing an organic vision of eco-spirituality put to practice.

The geographical location of the *Kaavu* also needs a deeper understanding to complete the environmental ethic that underlies its creation. In the first gathering that happened at *Tau Kaavu* on 10 April 2021, Bobby Jose shared his thoughts on the space with his companions. He said,

We will all pass away. But this (nobody's) place will remain for future generations. Nobody would sell it, since it is crowd-funded. All the trees in this vicinity will have to be cut down soon for residential purposes. Then, maybe after forty years, there will be a *kaavu* (grove) amidst all the buildings in this area . . . As a *kaavu* in the city, even if nothing else happens on its behalf, it will still remain relevant (Tau Community).

This statement echoes the relevance of *Tau Kaavu* as an urban grove in the fast-transforming geographical land usage in Kochi. In its growth as a metropolis, most of Kochi's backwaters and marshes have been transformed into flats and other huge buildings by corporates and private companies, intended to house the migrating (working) population and for industrial purposes. While environmental degradation becomes

the natural consequence of such unscrupulous development, places like *Tau Kaavu* would serve as eco-spaces that would help maintain clean air and a green environment. Thus, sustainable land usage as a natural forest would enable people to find respite and experience nature. *Tau Kaavu* thus fulfils SDG 15 by sustainably utilising terrestrial ecosystems, halting and reversing land degradation, and promoting a flourish of biodiversity.

Tau Kaavu fulfils the target of SDG 11 to “Provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces” (United Nations 24). There are two unfavourable concerns that *Tau Kaavu*'s location raises. The first is the alarming possibility of Kochi's marshlands and backwaters further declining and being converted into multi-storeyed buildings for residential purposes, a natural consequence of Kochi's growth as a metropolis. Not only is it harmful to Kerala's precarious environmental status, but it also brings forth the perilous displacement of the local, lower-middle-class population (the “ecosystem people” of Kochi) from their hereditary homelands and professions. The second concern is regarding the soil type of *Tau Kaavu*. The soil in *Tau Kaavu* is sandy, with significant salt content, considering its location near the backwaters surrounding Mulavukaad. Though several plants thrive using various mechanisms in salt-contented soils, the geographical patterns raise questions about the maximum growth that plants can attain in such soil types.

SDG 16 intends to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development” by building “effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” (United Nations 28). *Tau Kaavu* caters to function as a sociological endeavour by inviting people from all walks of society to be part of it. Ideated ultimately as an eco-spiritual space, it achieves this through the interventions made by society and for society to become peaceful and inclusive. *Tau Kaavu* aims to build an inclusive community that can tune into the peace offered by nature, practise simplicity, and together unearth holistic approaches to the environmental crisis of the times.

The mud-thatched huts are intended to be used for a temporary stay for anyone who desires a getaway from the mundane city life. The website of *Tau Kaavu* proposes the service of a few doctors (mostly psychiatrists or psychologists) in the vicinity who have offered their service to the visitors (Tau Community). The occasional gatherings at *Tau Kaavu* serve as steps toward building an inclusive community that shares thoughts, experiences, etc., despite the varied backgrounds from which they hail. All these gestures to harness a wholesome society is made not with commercial or tourist intentions but as a means of creating a space of communion with nature, God, fellow humans and creatures, and/or one's inner self, in short, eco-spirituality.

5. Conclusion

The worsening global environmental crisis has garnered commendable intervening responses at international and national levels of human organisations. It has been most effectively met through practical action at the grassroots level and the intervention of the local populace. Kerala has witnessed its share of environmental movements.³ However, the 2018 floods that ravaged most parts of Kerala, followed by environmental hazards in the consequent years – realising the consequences envisioned in the Gadgil Commission Report⁴ –

³Silent Valley Movement (1973-1985), the Plachimada Coca-Cola Struggle (1998-2006), Save Chaliyar Movement (1963-2001), and Endosulfan Issue (1978-2017) are a few noted environmental issues that succeeded in Kerala in the preceding decades.

⁴Gadgil Commission (The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, known after its chairman Madhav Gadgil) was an environmental research commission appointed by the Ministry for Environment and Forests, India. The Commission submitted its report in 2011, enlisting the need to preserve the geo-sensitive areas of the Western Ghats, lest environmental hazards be a daily occurrence. It was criticised heavily for not taking ground realities into consideration, and its proposals were not completely implemented due to political pressures and resistances. However, the 2018 floods and the natural disasters that

have instigated a concern in the Kerala psyche to preserve the environment, connecting Kerala's environmental activism to the global outcry for a greener planet.

Tau Kaavu becomes an example of religious ecosophy, expanded to meet the ecological and sociological needs of the neighbourhood through its underlying eco-spiritual values. Kerala, contemporaneously facing a critical ecological crisis, rising communal tensions, and violent political barbarities can find ideal spaces of ecological balance, communal harmony, and non-violent/healthy deliberations in projects like *Tau Kaavu*.

Pertaining to the Sustainable Development Goals 11, 13, 15, and 16, *Tau Kaavu* inspires more such grassroots-level movements with holistic visions to help contribute to the global steps of environmental recuperation. *Anjappam*,⁵ an endeavour ideated by Bobby Jose, may be read as a tangential movement. It caters to realising SDG 2, to "end hunger, ensure food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture" (United Nations 17).

Development cannot be terminated, but it can be made sustainable. Religious ecosophy plays a significant role in this since religion has been a defining factor of most human civilisations. The significance and scope of the article lie in exploring the prospects of ecosophy in regards to global religions that can help produce ecologically allied ideologies and aid sustainable development. Its realisation through locally-specific technologies and resource-utilisation techniques can harness a considerable change that might impact the younger generations' perspectives in the long run.

Kerala faced during the consequent years witnessed the predictions in the report come true.

⁵*Anjappam* refers to a chain of economy restaurants spread in places like Ranni, Kozhenchery, and Changanassery dedicated to provide quality food at low price, especially to the marginalised sections in society. It is intended to provide food for everyone without barriers, and creating awareness amongst the public about the value of food, and the right to consume it without having to compromise human dignity.

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