

SACRED TREES of the NILGIRIS

BIKKI MARAM

Elaeocarpus serratus L.- Wild Olive

Sacred trees are worshipped, set apart from other trees, found in forests or groves and venerated as a single individual or as a whole species (Dafni, 2006).

For the Badaga people of the Nilgiris, the *Bikki* or Wild Olive tree (of the *Elaeocarpaceae* family) is considered sacred. The *Rudraksh* is also a member of this family.



E. serratus is distributed in the Indian Subcontinent, Indo - China and South - east Asia. The flowers are in axillary racemes of pink to red in colour, flowering during April - May and July - August. They are mainly visited by carrion flies. It's olive green fruits are edible with the fruiting occurring between March - May. The fruit has a single stony seed which is beautifully sculptured on the surface. The fruits are high in starch and sugar with low amounts of protein and iron.

Local fruit sellers sell them by the roadside in the Nilgiris.



We surveyed the Shola forests around Kotagiri for presence of *Bikki* trees in the wild. We found that while there were many adult trees in the forests with abundant fruits, there were low numbers of saplings or seedlings. *Bikki* tree populations could be threatened by loss of forests, drying up of underground springs, rise in soil temperatures and many other factors. The *Bikki* is a heritage tree of the Nilgiris and is protected with the participation of local communities.

Most of the Badaga hattis (villages) have a *Bikki* tree either at the entrance, near the temple or close to a water source like a spring. Only fruits fallen on the ground may be collected and eaten. No branches are cut or any impurities brought close to the tree. Many elders told us that having the tree in the center of their village keeps the air clean and the people safe from sickness.



Other Sacred Trees of the Nilgiris

We found that the Badaga people also consider many other trees sacred and here is a list of those with brief descriptions.

Hadhuwe

Celtis tetrandra Roxb.
Nilgiri Elm



A deciduous tree seen along the margins of evergreen and Shola forests. The bark is greyish black and the leaves are distinctly oblique at the base. Hadhuwe trees are distributed in the Indo - Malayan region. The tree is leafless when it flowers during the month March-April. The flowers are tiny and pale green. Bees profusely forage on the flowers. The fruits are edible and have a bitter taste.

Kanneri

Syzygium cumini (Linn.) Skeels.
Naaval

A large evergreen tree, one of the most widely distributed in India, occurs in the major forest groups except in the very arid regions. The leaves are light pinkish when young, turning red before they mature. Kanneri trees are distributed in the Indian Subcontinent and parts of Southeast Asia. The flowers are in axillary or terminal cymes, white or pink in colour and slightly fragrant. Flowering is during March - April and July - August and they are a major source of food for bees. The fruit is a berry, green to red to dark blue when ripe. The seed in each berry is strongly astringent and slightly bitter.



Kola maavu

Persea macrantha (Nees) Kosterm.
Large-Flowered Bay Tree



A large evergreen tree which exudes a watery sap from the bark. Kola maavu is native to Peninsular India. The flowers are greenish and appear during February - April. It's fruit is a berry with a basal perianth rim, dark green to red when ripe.

Baige

Salix tetrasperma Roxb.
Indian Willow

A medium-sized tree of wet and swampy places, shedding leaves at the end of the monsoon season. The bark is rough, with deep, vertical fissures and young shoots and leaves that are silky. The leaves are dark green above and greyish below, with glandular teeth along its margin. The flowers are seen after the new leaves are out during December - March. The flowers appear to be like a bottlebrush and are densely woolly. The tree is traditionally said to indicate the presence of an underneath water source.

