

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CURRENT RESEARCH IN CHEMISTRY AND PHARMACEUTICAL SCIENCES

(p-ISSN: 2348-5213; e-ISSN: 2348-5221)

[www.ijcrops.com](http://www.ijcrops.com)

DOI: 10.22192/ijcrops

Coden: IJCROO(USA)

Volume 7, Issue 12 - 2020

## Research Article



DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22192/ijcrops.2020.07.12.004>

## Sthalavrikshas (Sacred Trees) in Southern Indian temples

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### Abstract

Sthalavriksha is referred to as a plant, which is venerated from time immemorial by devotees as being as holy as the presiding deity of a temple. The Sanskrit term Sthalavriksha means tree of the locality (Sthal - place; Vriksha - tree). The Thamirabarani River originates from the peak of the Pothigai hills on the eastern slopes of the Western Ghats at an elevation of 1,725 metres (5,659 ft) above sea-level. Nava Kailasam and Navathirupathi refers to nine individual ancient temples of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu in southern districts of Tamil Nadu. These temples are located in the districts Tirunelveli and Tuticorin. The survey was conducted in temples and documentation of the medicinal utilization of Sthalavriksha species by user groups were recorded using two techniques: Interview and questionnaire and direct observation and interaction. Results obtained as; *Aegle marmelos* L., *Ficus benghalensis* L., *Limonia acidissima* L., *Tamarindus indica* L., *Madhuca longifolia* J.F. Macbr., *Carissa carandas* L., *Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lam. These 07 trees were reported in this research article. Leaves, Flowers, Fruit, Seeds, Latex, Bark and Roots reported parts were used for medicine for indications of Diabetes, Skin diseases, Respiratory, Chest problems, Prickly heat, Toothache, Eye diseases, Gastro intestinal diseases, Uterus Problems, Dropsy, Refrigerant, Pains, Bruises and Asthma. So, it is the responsibility of the current generation to reservation and promote these aesthetic assets to conserve biodiversity and nature.

**Keywords:** Sacred Trees; Sthalavriksha; Temple Tree; Thamirabarani; Nava Kailayam; Nava Thirupathi; Southern Tamil Nadu.

### Introduction

Sthalavriksha (sthal: vicinity, vriksha: tree) in temples. Adoration of plants is practiced throughout the world and is well recognized from pre-historic periods in India. One such religious worship is known as Sthalavriksha. Gunasekaran & Balasubramanian are stated that, very few field

studies have been conducted on Sthalavriksha practice and its role in social, ecological and environmental impacts of local people. In particular, ethnomedicinal uses on Sthalavrikshas, occurring in the temples of Tamil Nadu have been unexplored. Sthalavriksha is referred to as a

plant, which is venerated from time immemorial by devotees as being as holy as the presiding deity of a temple (Gunasekaran & Balasubramanian, 2005).

The Sanskrit term Sthalavriksha means tree of the locality (Sthal - place; Vriksha - tree). Sthalavriksha is a natural tree found in the temple site before construction of the temple and most temple myths (sthalapuranas) and temple histories (sthalavaralaru) refer to a prime deity that was first unearthed or found under the tree. Nedunchezhiyan & Srinivasan reported, the Sthalavriksha is a single plant mostly in the form of a tree or in some places occurring as an herb, shrub, grass or climber. These are different than a group of plants found in sacred sites or sacred groves. In Tamil Nadu there are 25,000 ancient temples and these heritage sites play a vital role in conserving traditional arts, temple architectures, Tamil culture and also Sthalavrikshas. Sthalavrikshas are an integral part of temple worship and this practice is still in vogue in Tamil Nadu and its bordering states of Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and the neighbouring Island nation of Sri Lanka. Sthalavriksha worship is mostly associated with Shaivism (worship of Lord Siva), Vaishnavam (worship of Lord Vishnu) and Sthalavriksha get divine power from these deities, which are treated as equal to the prime deity of the temple (Nedunchezhiyan 2005, Srinivasan 1972). Thambiran reported that, many medieval Tamil sacred hymns e.g., Devaram (Thambiran 1997) and Thiviyaprabantham (Anon 1962) refer to Sthalavrikshas and their associated deities. Even though Amirthalingam, Sundara Sobitharaj & Thirugnanam reported that, Sthalavriksha worship is an ancient practice in Tamil Nadu very few studies have been conducted on its importance (Amirthalingam 1998, Sundara Sobitharaj 1994, Thirugnanam 1995).

The Thamirabarani or Tamraparni or Porunai is a perennial river that originates from the Agastyarkoodam peak of Pothigai hills of the Western Ghats, above Papanasam in the Ambasamudram taluk reported by Leelananda & Sudharshan. It flows through Tirunelveli and

Thoothukudi districts of the Tamil Nadu state of southern India into the Gulf of Mannar. It was called the Tamraparni River in the pre-classical period, a name it lent to the island of Sri Lanka. The old Tamil name of the river is Porunai. From the source to sea, the river is about 128 kilometres (80 mi) long and is the only perennial river in Tamil Nadu. This river flows towards north direction initially. However, it changes to east direction later.

Sivasubramaniam reported as, the Thamirabarani River originates from the peak of the Pothigai hills on the eastern slopes of the Western Ghats at an elevation of 1,725 metres (5,659 ft) above sea-level. The river is joined by its headwater tributaries Peyar, Ullar, Pambar before it flows into the Karaiyar Dam reservoir, where it meets Karaiyar. The river forms the Paanatheertham waterfalls, 40 metres (130 ft) high, as it enters the Kariyar reservoir. Servalar joins the Thamirabarani before it enters into the Papanasam lower reservoir, which was built for the Papanasam Hydroelectric station. The river descends down the mountains near Papanasam, where it forms the Kalyanatheertham falls and Agasthiar falls. (Sivasubramaniam, 2009) The river flows on the plains eastwards from Papanasam. The first tributary to join Thamirabarani in the plains is the Manimuthar River, which originating from Manjolai hills and joins Thamirabarani near Aladiyoor village. The towns Ambasamudram and Kallidaikurichi are located respectively on the left and right banks of Thamiraparani, after which the river meets the tributary Gadanathi River at Tiruppudaimaruthur. Before the Gadanathi's entry into the Thamirabarani, the Gadanathi River is joined by the rivers Kallar, Karunaiyar and Veeranathi or Varahanathi which joins the river Gadanathi about 1.5 kilometres (0.9 mi) north-east of Kila Ambur. The Gadanathi is fed by the Jambunathi and Ramanathi Rivers. The Pachaiyar River which originates from the Kalakkadu reserve forests at about 1,300 metres (4,300 ft) above sea level joins the Thamirabarani near Tharuvai village in Palayamkottai Taluk. The river bisects the twin cities Tirunelveli and Palayamkottai before meeting its major and

affluent tributary Chithar (Chitrathi) which arises in the Kutralam hills and receives supply from the rivers Gundar, Hanumanathi and Karuppanathi (Vairavangkulam Kadayanallur). The Chittar River runs almost parallel to Thamirabarani till it joins the main river near Sivalaperi. Thamirabarani passes through the taluks of Tirunelveli and Palayamkottai of Tirunelveli district and Srivaikundam and Tiruchendur taluks of Thoothukkudi district.

**Nava Kailasam** refers to nine individual ancient temples of Lord Shiva in southern districts of Tamil Nadu. These temples are located in the districts Tirunelveli and Tuticorin. All these nine temples are linked with Sage agasthiyar. Temples: Sage agasthiyar was doing penance in the podhikai hills. One of his prime disciples was urOmachamunivar. He prayed Lord pashupathi to get liberation. The Lord wanted to bless this to him through his guru agasthiyar. agasthiyar put nine flowers in the river and asked uromachamunivar to install a shiva lingam as kailashanathar, wherever the flowers dock on the bank and finally bathe and worship the Lord in the place where the river joins the ocean, by doing so he would get what he wished. Adhering to his guru's words, munivar worshipped the Stain-throated Lord in the nine places where the nine flowers stopped in the form of shiva lingam and finally bathed in the place where thamiraparani joined the ocean and got liberated. These nine abodes are called navakayilayam.

It is possible that over time, the association of the number 9 with the Navagrahas has resulted in each of these temples being revered as the sthalam of one of the Navagrahas, similar to the Nava Tirupati temples between Tirunelveli and Tuticorin.

**Navathirupathi** Temples is a set of nine Hindu temple devoted to Lord Vishnu located in Tiruchendur-Tirunelveli route, Tamil Nadu, India in the banks of Thamiraparani river. Ramesh & Rajarajan reported that, All these 9 temples are classified as "Divya Desams", the 108 temples of Vishnu revered by the 12 poet saints, or Alvars (Ramesh & Rajarajan, 2011). The temples are

revered in Nalayira Divya Prabandham, the 7th–9th century Vaishnava canon, by Nammazhwar. The temple is classified as a Divyadesam, one of the 108 Vishnu temples that are mentioned in the book. The temple is also classified as a Navatirupathi, the nine temples revered by Nammazhwar located in the banks of Thamiraparani river. The utsavar of Nammalvar is taken in a palanquin to each of the 9 temples, through the paddy fields in the area. The paasurams (poems) dedicated to each of the 9 Divyadesams are chanted in the respective shrines. This is the most important of the festivals in this area, and it draws thousands of visitors. (Rajagopalan, 1993)

## Materials and Methods

**Study Areas** - The study was carried out in Tamil Nadu state. In the river bank temples of Thamirabarani which, flows through Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi districts of the Tamil Nadu state of southern India into the Gulf of Mannar. The temples are the Nava Kailasam temples – where the 9 temples with god Shiva and similar to the Nava Tirupati-where the 9 temples with god Vishnutemples between Tirunelveli and Tuticorin.

## Methods

The survey was conducted in temples that were The temples are the Nava Kailasam temples – where the 9 temples with god Shiva and similar to the Nava Tirupati-where the 9 temples with god Vishnu temples between Tirunelveli and Tuticorin to find whether the Sthalavriksha practice still continues. During the temple survey the researchers interviewed the local priest about the user groups and from them were selected people over 40 years of age to approach.

Documentation of the medicinal utilization of Sthalavriksha species by user groups were recorded using two techniques:

1. Interview and questionnaire - A questionnaire was used to record the knowledge of the ethnomedicinal use from the user groups, including parts used, disease treated, etc.
2. Direct observation and interaction - Collections of Photography of plant parts of Sthalavrikshas by researchers.

## Results

Table 1: list of temples and sacred trees

NO	NAVA KILAYAM	SACRED TREE	PLANET	SACRED TREE	NAVA THIRUPATHI
1.	PAPANASAM TEMPLE	கிளா/களா (Kila / Kizha)	SUN (சூரியன்)	ஆல் (Aal)	SRIVAIKUNDAM TEMPLE
2.	CHERAN MAHADEVI TEMPLE	ஆல் (Aal)	MOON (சந்திரன்)	பலா(Pala)	NATHAM TEMPLE
3.	KODAGANALLUR TEMPLE	வில்வம் (Vilvam)	MARS (செவ்வாய்)	புளி(Puli)	THIRUKOLUR TEMPLE
4.	THEN THIRUPPERAI TEMPLE	வில்வம் (Vilvam)	MERCURY (புதன்)	வில்வம் (Vilvam)	THIRUPPULINGUDI TEMPLE
5.	MURAPPANADU TEMPLE	பலா(Pala)	JUPITER (குரு)	புளி(Puli)	AZHVAR THIRUNAGARI TEMPLE
6.	SERNDHAPOOMANGALAM TEMPLE	வில்வம் (Vilvam)	VENUS (சுக்கிரன்)	வில்வம் (Vilvam)	THEN THIRUPPERAI TEMPLE
7.	THIRUVAIKUNDAM TEMPLE	இலுப்பை (Iluppai)	SATURN (சனி)	ஆல் (Aal)	THIRUKUZHANTHAI TEMPLE
8.	KUNNATHAUR TEMPLE	வில்வம் (Vilvam)	NORTH NODE (ராகு)	விளா(Vila)	IRATTAI TTHIRUPPATHI TEMPLE
9.	RAAJAPATHY TEMPLE	வில்வம் (Vilvam)	SOUTH NODE (கேது)	விளா(Vila)	THIRUTHOLAIVILLI MANGALAM TEMPLE





Figure 1: Nava Kailayam and its Road Map

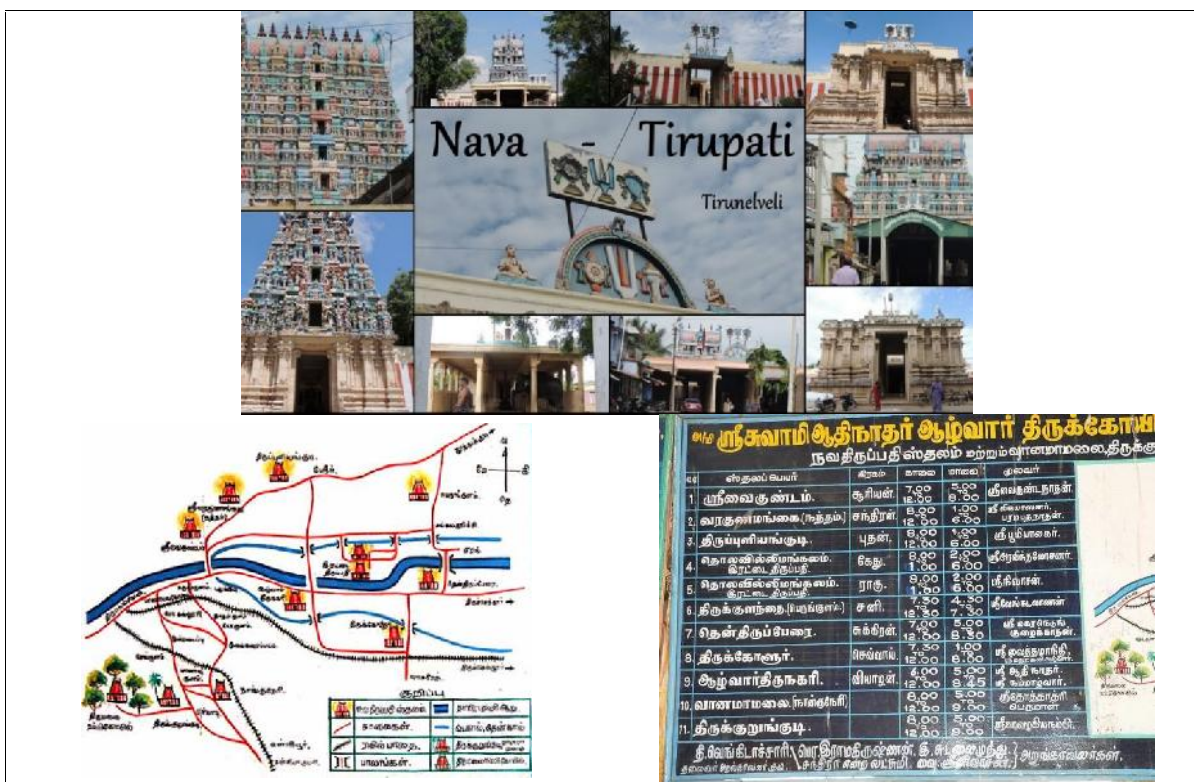


Figure 2: Nava Thirupathi and its Road Map

Table 2: Botanical Details of sacred trees

No.	Sacred tree	English Name	Botanical name	Family
1.	வில்வம் (Vilvam)	Beal tree	<i>Aegle marmalos</i> L.	Rutaceae
2.	ஆல் (Aal)	Banyan tree	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i> L.	Moraceae
3.	பலா(Pala)	Jack tree	<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i> Lam.	Moraceae
4.	விளா(Vila)	Wood apple tree	<i>Limonia acidissima</i> L.	Rutaceae
5.	புளி(Puli)	Tamarind tree	<i>Tamarindus indica</i> L.	Fabaceae
6.	இலுப்பை (Iluppai)	Honey tree / Butter tree	<i>Madhuca longifolia</i> J.F. Macbr.	Sapotaceae
7.	கிளா/களா (Kila/Kizha)	Bengal-Carunda tree	<i>Carissa carandas</i> L.	Apocynaceae

(Anonymous, 1988-89)

Table 3: Frequency of sacred trees in selected temples

No.	Botanical name	Frequency
1.	<i>Aegle marmalos</i> L.	7
2.	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i> L.	3
3.	<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i> Lam.	2
4.	<i>Limonia acidissima</i> L.	2
5.	<i>Tamarindus indica</i> L.	2
6.	<i>Madhuca longifolia</i> J.F. Macbr.	1
7.	<i>Carissa carandas</i> L.	1

Chart 1: Frequency of Sthalavrikshas

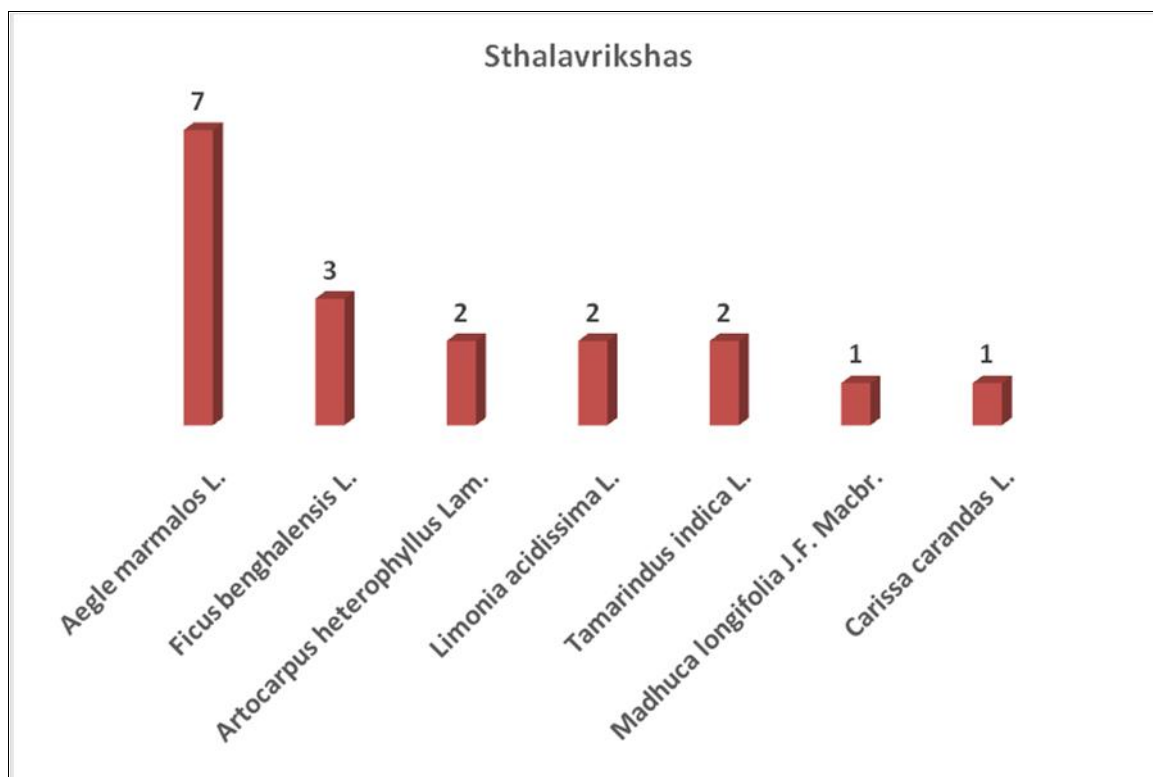






Table 4: Medicinal Uses and plants parts of Sacred Trees





No.	Botanical Name	Part used in Medicinal Purposes	Medicinal Uses
1.	<i>Aegle marmalos</i> L.	Leaves Fruit	Diabetes, Skin diseases, cough Cold, Chest problems, Diarrhoea, Dysentery
2.	<i>Ficus benghalensis</i> L.	Bark Leaves Seeds Latex	Dysentery Diaehehoea Refrigerant Pains, Bruises
3.	<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i> Lam.	Leaves Roots	Skin diseases, Ulcers Asthma, Diarrhoea
4.	<i>Limonia acidissima</i> L.	Bark Leaves Fruit	Vomiting Cough, Cold, Prickly heat Ulcers in throat & mouth
5.	<i>Tamarindus indica</i> L.	Bark Leaves Flowers Fruit Seed	Peptic Ulcer Stomach ache, Diarrhoea Eye Pain Uterus Problems Vomiting, Dysentery, Toothache
6.	<i>Madhuca longifolia</i> J.F. Macbr.	Bark	Skin diseases
7.	<i>Carissa carandas</i> L.	Flowers Fruits	Eye diseases Vomiting, Dropsy

(Gunasekaran, 2012)

Table 5: Images of Sacred Trees

Botanical name	Images
<i>Aegle marmalos</i> L.	 
<i>Ficus benghalensis</i> L.	 



<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i> Lam.	
<i>Limonia acidissima</i> L.	
<i>Tamarindus indica</i> L.	
<i>Madhuca longifolia</i> J.F. Macbr.	
<i>Carissa carandas</i> L.	



## Discussion

Sthalavriksha researches ethnomedicinal practices are scanty. Information on uses of Sthalavrikshas in temples of Tamil Nadu are built on secondary sources (Aravanan 1984, Samy 1978). Thirugnanam (1995) stated 69 Sthalavriksha species and their medicinal values, mostly in Siddha medicine (traditional medicinal practices of Tamil Nadu). Only three research works have been conducted as field studies. Sundara Sobitharaj (1994) recorded 74 plant species including their medicinal uses from 400 temples. Amirthalingam (1998) recorded 60 Sthalavrikshas from 300 temples of Tamil Nadu including traditional medicinal uses. Narasimhan & Rathnavathy (2003) identified 14 Sthalavriksha species in northern Tamil Nadu.

The present study not only reveals a view of Sthalavriksha worship but also the medicinal utilization of Sthalavrikshas in Nava Kailayam and Navatirupathi temples in south Tamil Nadu.

During the present study only 7 species were reported as having medicinal uses Sthalavrikshas were documented.

Most of the Sthalavrikshas are found in the temple sites even before construction of the temple hence Sthalavriksha worship practice has deeply penetrated into the life style of Tamils and Tamil culture as naming of temple towns, deities and human beings are followed after Sthalavriksha names.

*Aegle marmalos* L., *Ficus benghalensis* L., *Limonia acidissima* L., *Tamarindus indica* L., *Madhuca longifolia* J.F. Macbr., *Carissa carandas* L., *Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lam. These trees were reported as Sthalavriksha (temple tree or sacred tree) in Nnavakailayam and Navatirupathi at Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi district nearby the Tambraparani river.

Parts used for medicine were reported as Leaves, Flowers, Fruit, Seeds, Latex, Bark and Roots.

Indications of the temple trees were list as; Diabetes, Skin diseases, Cold, Cough, Chest problems, Prickly heat, Toothache, Eye Pain, Eye diseases, Ulcers in throat & mouth, Vomiting, Peptic Ulcer, Stomach ache, Diarrhoea, Dysentery, Uterus Problems, Dropsy, Refrigerant, Pains, Bruises and Asthma.

## Conclusion

In the present study, it is concluded that the religious activities are having a close relationship with plants boost up the mental health of local people of south Tamil Nadu and many of the sacred plants found in the household and temples were used for various religious cultural activities as well as for health care. *Aegle marmalos* L., *Ficus benghalensis* L., *Limonia acidissima* L., *Tamarindus indica* L., *Madhuca longifolia* J.F. Macbr., *Carissa carandas* L., *Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lam. These 07 trees were reported as Sthalavriksha (temple tree or sacred tree) in Nava kailayam and Navatirupathi at Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi district nearby the Tambraparani river. Leaves, Flowers, Fruit, Seeds, Latex, Bark and Roots reported parts were used for medicine for indications of Diabetes, Skin diseases, Cold, Cough, Chest problems, Prickly heat, Toothache, Eye Pain, Eye diseases, Ulcers in throat & mouth, Vomiting, Peptic Ulcer, Stomach ache, Diarrhoea, Dysentery, Uterus Problems, Dropsy, Refrigerant, Pains, Bruises and Asthma.

So, it is the responsibility of the current generation to reservation and promote these aesthetic assets to conserve biodiversity and nature, which will surely play a part in the progression of human beings. These sacred trees preserved through eras by our ancestors as potential bio resources should be respected and conserved for the future generation. The sthalavrikshas is a mean of conservation not only plants but also biodiversity.

## Conflict of interest

The authors of research declared that, no any conflict of interest.

## Funding

There is no any grant or funded for this research.

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How to cite this article:

A. Rajesh, S. R. Pholtan Rajeev. (2020). Sthalavrikshas (Sacred Trees) in Southern Indian temples. Int. J. Curr. Res. Chem. Pharm. Sci. 7(12): 24-34.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22192/ijcrps.2020.07.12.004>