



## **Mythical Reverence and Rational Reasoning Towards Nature: A discussion**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The ancient art of storytelling is flavoured with numerous myths. Literature reflects this in various forms of writing. One can find numerous myths in association with religion and culture. Primitive men worshipped nature, as it seemed to be superior to human power. They looked at the environment in awe. And myths prevailed on nature in the ancient era. Later on, men raised questions against these myths based on scientific arguments. They found that these myths were laid to preserve nature. Humans need a healthy environment to live a healthy life. Thus it is mandatory for them to safeguard it. With time humans started disregarding these myths saying that science is more important. Thus the reverence towards nature is also neglected which leads to disrespect and carelessness towards the environment.

The present paper focuses on the myths prevalent in Southern India with particular reference to Tamil literature and also points out the mythical reason behind preserving nature. It explores how the human race failed to safeguard nature by neglecting the ancient myths. It attempts to prove that science is there to restore the environment and not to degrade.

**Keywords:** Reverence, Environmental Restoration, Myth, Degradation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tamilnadu is known for its cultural heritage and antiquity. Tamil literature emphatically portrays the tradition and cultural practices of the natives. All works of ancient Tamil literature are embedded with references to nature. Most of the mythical references are related to the life of people. Bagyameri in her book *Tamilar Pandbadum Payanpadum* (Tamil People's Culture and Usage) makes a clear description of the myths. She says that myths give hope in life. She states "Every human being has a heap of beliefs in his mind. Trusts and faiths help and support the mind which wanders for benefits" (Bagyameri 23). Even a small wood would seem like a boat to a man stranded in the sea. Similarly, age-old mythical beliefs help an oscillating mind to begin life afresh.

Invocation is a cultural practice abounding all parts of the world. And it is portrayed in many works of literature. Invoking the muses is prevalent in Western literature. But Tamil poets invoked the existing natural elements. They consider this kind of invocation as a powerful tool. For instance *Silapathikaram*, one of the oldest works in Tamil literature, begins with a praise not of the lord, but the existing natural elements such as the Sun, the mountains and the rain. It begins with these lines of invocation.

"Praised be the Moon! Praised be the Moon, for, like the cool white umbrella of the kind who wears the pollen spreading garlands, He blesses our whole world. Praised be the Sun! Praised be the Sun, for, the commands of the Lord of the Kaverinadu, He revolves round the golden peeked Meru. Praised be the mighty Clouds! Praised be the mighty Clouds, for like him whose land the frightful sea surrounds, they stand on high, and pour their gifts to men below" (1-12)

This shows that the author is aware of the fact that existing nature is eternal and through such invocation he wanted his artform to be an eternal one.

### **Uniqueness**

Usually myth is related with culture and tradition. But this paper presents a unique artistic form by exploring the relationship between myth and nature. And it also discusses the reason behind combining these two elements in a fruitful way. It is vital to emphasise the importance of nature to the future generations so that they can appreciate its authentic place in this eternal world. The uniqueness of this paper is the discussion of an unexplored topic.

### **Objective**

- To identify the reason behind creating these myths
- To glorify the intention of the ancient myth makers who wisely blended the reason with myths
- To put forward the idea of accepting the myth if it satisfies the reason logically

### **Findings**

A blind acceptance of myth is an act of foolishness. So, one should be aware of the rationale behind these existing myths. Humans have the ability to understand and relate myths to a proper reason through a sixth sense. Therefore people should evaluate myths properly so that it is not misinterpreted.

### **Future scope**

Interpreting and deciphering myth and reality is always fascinating and interesting. Myths are misread and people tend to ignore them based on its outer meaning and they refuse to realise its deeper significance. There is scope for further research on the reason behind the creation of various unexplored and hidden myths which are neglected because of the wrong meaning conveyed.

## **DISCUSSION**

It is obvious that hopes and happiness bring a special spirit to life. This is one of the reasons for the existence of countless myths in ancient society. These myths are reflected in ancient literature. When myths deal with nature people feel comfortable and are healed from all of their problems. People can feel goodness in all their doings when it is associated with nature. Myths mentioned in ancient Tamil literature regarding nature and its elements are the major concerns of the present paper.

People of the Sangam Age celebrated nature in all possible ways. The major intention behind this celebration is gratitude. The society as a whole relies on agriculture for both survival and business (or trade). The major components for a good yield are humidity, temperature and fertile land. Thus they worshipped the sun, the rain and the land. Through this act they convey that one should not get the full credit without acknowledging all other means through which a product is made or a work is done. And so, they showed reverence to nature. By this act, it is clear that the yield is not only because of their work but also due to the suitable climate rendered by the environment and so they celebrated it. One such is the celebration of Pongal, a festival celebrating the harvest season. It is celebrated as Makar Sankranti in Andhra Pradesh. This festival is dedicated to show gratitude to the Sun God and the bullocks which help in ploughing the fields. During this celebration, the first harvest is offered to mother earth as thanksgiving. Ancient people had a habit of entering the agricultural land on bare foot. This is one among the existing myths. This myth teaches the value of respecting Mother nature.

In Mahabharata, Arjuna questions Dhritarashtra as to why a King should perform the Yaaga or Pooja to Mother Earth before ploughing it for cultivation. Dhritarashtra replies that small creatures may die due to the sharp equipment that the farmers use for ploughing. The King performs the yaaga on behalf of the farmers through which he apologises for killing the tiny creatures. Through this episode Vyasa teaches the readers to show compassion towards all living beings. The same ritual is followed by performing the bhoomi pooja before raising a building. It can be considered as seeking the permission of Mother Earth before digging it. But the present scenario is totally different. The lands which were worshipped are turned to buildings and mining lands. Nature is destroyed and fertile land gets exploited by the capitalist minds of people.

According to Tamil Mythology, natural elements are worshipped as Gods with specific names. Knowing the importance of rain, the Indira Festival is celebrated which is named after the God of Rain known as 'Indiran'. This celebration is mentioned in detail in Silapathikaram.

"One thousand and eighty kinds bore on their heads gold pots filled with cool and holy water rendered fragrant by floating pollen of flowers of the Kaveri, taken from where it joins the sea, and performed the bathing ceremony of the Lord of Gods, to the delight of the earth and the admiration of heaven" (164-168)

This festival is celebrated for twenty-eight days on the banks of river Kaveri as it is known as 'The Eternal River of Life' in Tamilnadu. People from various parts of Tamilnadu travel to the banks of river Kaveri, with their family members, to participate in the celebration. They stay in a public inn and enjoy the jubilant festive mode. They have a feast and enjoy performances of dance, drama etc. performed on the river basins. The reason behind this celebration is the theme of the performances. Through this, the significance of rain and water is taught to people. Mythically it is celebrated to praise the lord of rain named 'Indiran'. Through this mythical visit to the river Kaveri every year, the river basins of the delta region are monitored and safeguarded. This is

the reason behind selecting the delta region for the celebration. These celebrations are restricted nowadays which leads to the reduction in the area of river basins. This shows that every myth and cultural implication holds deep meaning and reason.

Rivers are portrayed as Godmothers. In Mahabharata, Bishma is recognised as the son of the holy river Ganga. She is witnessed as a powerful woman in the epic. On 20th March 2017 Uttarakhand High Court officially acknowledged river Ganga as a 'living entity'. The Chief Secretary of the State and the Advocate General of the State are appointed as the guardian of the river. Through this the court emphasises the importance of respecting and safeguarding the river. We can also see references made to rivers in 20th Century literature. Muthaiah, popularly known as Kaviyarasu Kannadasan mentioned the glory of river Kaveri in his collection of verse named Kaviyarasu Kannadasan Kavithaigal (Poems of Kaviyarasu Kannadasan) under the title "Kaveri Potri" ("Praise Kaveri"). He personifies the river Kaveri as God. He makes the poem special with the following line "Arathaiyae valarpai potri" ("Praising you as you nurture morality") (Kannadhasan 142).

The Tamil word 'Aram' refers to morality. He continues to praise the river as it inculcates morality. This line may raise a question among the readers. In what way does the river bring morality in the society? It has a hidden meaning. Water is the most significant and prominent element for an agriculture based society. During the non-monsoon season, the only source of water for crops is the river. If the farmers get good yield, their life is improved. If not, people suffer for survival and some may indulge in criminal activities. Inequality paves way to untoward behaviour among the citizens. If everyone gets everything, society will flourish forever and thus immoral happenings won't exist. This is the reason behind mentioning the river as a morality developer. By including numerous references to nature, writers of Tamil literature deliberated on the duty of people to treasure it.

Mythical references to natural elements as God is mentioned in ancient works like Akananūru, Patirruppattu, Natrinai and Kalittokai. Kalittokai is one of the eight anthologies of Sangam Literature named Ettuthokai. It talks about love and the life of the hero and the heroine. In Kalittokai, Nallandhuvanar portrays the hero promising the ocean god. "...swearing on the great ocean god..." (Nallandhuvanar 131)

Akananūru also comes under the Eight Anthologies of Sangam literature. Through this work the readers are able to know about the social nuances and life of the people who lived in the ancient age. In one of the poems of Akananūru, Parinar says the honeycombs are protected by the mountain gods.

May you live long, my heart! We are sad thinking about her, so difficult to get, like precious jewels and wealth hidden by the ancient Vēlirs in their huge city, near the huge, fierce Pāzhi Mountains where large honeycombs hang, protected by gods who cannot be ruined, according to Tradition (Parinar, 372)

This poem is about a hero who grieves that he is unable to get the affection of his lady love. He continues to mourn that she is like a precious jewel which is safeguarded by the people of 'Vaeleer' in a huge city. She is like a honeycomb which is protected by the gods of the mountain, which cannot be taken by anyone. He also feels sad for his heart which is longing for love. It is notable that the ancient literature gives all the references to life in relation with nature. It gives out specific elements of nature through these references.

Mountains are considered as sacred places of worship. This secures it from quarrying. Mountains play a prominent role in bringing rain. When the clouds laden with water reaches the mountains it rises up to overcome the barrier. At the higher level it cools and loses its volume. This forms orographic clouds which result in precipitation. Thus mountains are safeguarded in the name of gods to beget rain.

Sagalasanar in his verse (which verse, name of the poem) says trees are gods.

You are thinking about going to your town at night when a small, female black ibis that is in its nest built of thorns on a tree with a god,... (Sagalasanar, 270)

The above verse is about a hero who is leaving his lady love and is moving to his home town without considering the grief of his lady love. The speaker of the poem is a friend of the heroine, who explains about her sufferings. In this particular poem, she talks about the agony of a bird which is searching for its mate in a tree. By referring to the bird she tells him that even a bird experiences trauma due to separation and why can't the hero experience the same for the heroine.

Though all the above mentioned poems are about love, the author gives references to nature and other living beings. All poems of the anthology Ettuthokai hold natural references. Poets observe the beauty and significance of nature and reproduce them in their writings.

Professor S. Sedhuraman in his book "Sutruchoolal Payilvugal" ("Environmental Studies") mentions Sacred forests. Sacred forests refers to the group of trees and plants grown around sacred regions which is believed to be the place of god. These forests are not allowed to be cut and they are protected in the name of god (Sedhuraman 13). Even in India some of the tribal people are worshipping certain trees as their deities. For instance, the tribes of Bihar named Munda and Santhal worship 'Maguva' (Madhuca longifolia) and 'Cadamba' (Neolamarckia cadamba) trees. Ancient tribes of Orissa and Bihar worship Tamarind (Tamarindus indica) and Mango trees (Mangifera indica) during weddings. In Tamilnadu 'Neem' (Azadirachta indica) tree and 'Sacred fig' (Ficus religiosa) are worshipped as gods (Sedhuraman 15). This practice has saved numerous trees from destruction. Through this we can see the transcendent meaning embedded in cultural practices. With all the

above-mentioned references from ancient literature, it is right to say that all the existing natural elements are sacred which should not be ruined; else it will lead to the downfall of the human race.

## CONCLUSION

In the book named *Sanga Ilakkiyathil Iyarkai* (1967) (Nature in Ancient Literature) M. Varadharajan says, ancient poets did not only write about nature but they introduced the concept of nature as a reference to every nuance of life (Varadharajan 451). The writers of Tamil literature made the readers enjoy nature through their writings and also made them show reverence towards it. This is done through myth creating and myth practising.

The ancient people did not maintain any scientific records of the myths nor did they give the reason behind these mythical practices. Most of the myths have become meaningless due to their improper conveyance. An attempt is made to explore the appreciable reasons behind these myths. This paper does not insist on accepting all the myths but provides a new approach on the concealed meanings behind some of the mythical practices which are specifically made on nature.

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