

REPRESENTATION OF WATER AND WATER BODIES IN caḍkam TEXTS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *pu^onā̄ , ū^ou*: AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The caḍkam Tamil literature is a major source of information for the indigenous (Indian) perception of the natural world. Eco-criticism analyses the manner in which a community perceived, approached, used and respected nature as reflected in their texts. Ecocriticism is a useful method for studying the historical and archaeological contexts with textual sources. This paper presents a preliminary study on the representation of water and water bodies in the caḍkam Texts with special reference to a few select the poems in the *pu^onā̄ , ū^ou*.

Key Words: caḍkam Text, Ecocriticism, Early Historic Period, Tamil Nadu

Introduction

The caḍkam Tamil literature is a major source of information for the indigenous perception of the natural world. The humanities and social science studies in India, which have been greatly influenced and conditioned by the Western schools of thoughts, have not given due consideration to the vast body of indigenous knowledge and perception for theory building. As a researcher working in the area of history and archaeology, I feel that the perceptions presented in the indigenous texts, go beyond the realm of literature, and have the potential to contribute to theory building and applications for contemporary social development. There is great scope for using indigenous thinking for archaeological and anthropological theories and models. In this paper, I briefly present the representation of water and water bodies in the caḍkam Texts with special reference to a few select the poems in *pu^onā̄ , ū^ou* text. It is a preliminary attempt towards understanding the eco-critical perspectives in the caḍkam Tamil texts.

Eco-Criticism

According to Loretta Johnson ecocriticism deals with “how humans relate to nonhuman nature or the environment in literature.”¹ Eco-criticism analyses the manner in which a community perceived, approached, used and respected nature as reflected in their texts. It also studies the approaches to nature (perception of individual poets) as reflected in the literature. Ecocriticism is a useful method for studying the historical and archaeological contexts with textual sources.

The caḍkam Texts

The caḍkam literature, an anthology of love and war poems in Tamil, serves as a primary source of information for the early historic period, which is otherwise called the caḍkam Age. The major works of caḍkam corpus are *tolkāppiyam* (ancient Tamil grammatical work), *eḥuttokai* (Eight Anthologies) and *pattuppāḥḥu* (Ten Idylls). The literature narrates the day-to-day life of common people residing in five-fold landscapes, namely, the *ku^oiḍci* (the hilly zone) the *mullai* (pastoral zone), *marutam* (the riverine zone), *neytal* (coastal zone) and *pālai* (the arid zone), as visualized by the poets. The first three centuries of the Christian era is the widely accepted date for the composition of the

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caḍkam literature. The *pati ,eḍ kĀḌkkaḍakku* (18 minor works), and the epics of *cilappatikāram* and *maḍimekalai* are the post- caḍkam works, assigned to post-3rd century CE period.² Historians and Tamil scholars have extensively investigated this literature to understand the socio-economic life and formations in the Tamil country.³ Researchers including Srilatha and Nirmal Selvamony have studied the caḍkam poems from ecocritical perspectives.⁴

Perception of Environment in Tamil Texts

The concept of ecosystemic view is beautifully portrayed in the *tiḍai* concept elaborated in *tolkāppiyam*. It explains very clearly that the plants and animals too are part of the same broader class like the humans. This perception clearly goes against the human-environment dichotomy seen in some of the Western approaches. In a sense, some elements of modern Darwinian and Bose-ian ideas were well known to *tolkāppiyar*.

Environmental Determinism of *tirukku°aḍ*

The Tamil text of *tirukku°aḍ* is useful for understanding the perceptions ancient Tamils on environment. In the canto on the "Importance of Sky" (*vā , ci°appu*, Chapter 2), *tirukku°aḍ* highlights the importance of rain and water. He argues about the importance of water and says that the world cannot exist without water and it is essential for maintaining a cultural order (*ku°al* 20). He adds that water is an essential component of an ideal country or territory (*nāḇu*). *tirukku°aḍ* argues that rain water is like the nectar (*ku°al* 11) and it has the power to destroy, by not showering on time (*ku°al* 15) and it can sustain all creatures, and even the sea cannot survive without it (*ku°al* 17). Interestingly, in the sequence of *tirukku°aḍ*, the chapter on *vā , ci°appu* is placed after the first one on god. It, in a sense, reflects Marxist thought that the infrastructure is very important for the superstructure to survive and function, when it says that penance and donation cannot exist without rain (*ku°al* 19). Thus *tirukku°aḍ* reflects some of the views of environmental determinism, where environmental factors are considered to mould the cultures. Environmental determinism is seen as a controversial perception now and it is considered to have loaded with heavy political ideology.⁵ However, Tiruvaḍḍuvar's view should be considered a very simple, humble form of environmental determinism.

Representation from *pu°anā , ū°u*

In this section, a few select references from *pu°anā , ū°u* are discussed from the ecocritical perspective.

paḍca pūtas and water

The concept of *paḍca pūtas* or five elements is the Indian perception and categorization of nature. The *pu°am* song 2 compares the characteristics of the five basic elements of nature, *viz.*, land, sky, wind, fire and water, with that of the *cēra , utiya , cēralāthaḍ*. Each element is ascribed with a characteristic: land with tolerance, sky with analytical capabilities, strength with the wind, fire with destruction and water with blessing. By comparing the king with the five elements the poets creates a powerful personification of the king. This traditional perception places humans as part of the ecosystem, and nature is attributed with certain qualities, which are also part of human characteristics and nature is seen as a superpower or force to reckon with. The happenings like the cyclone which engulfed Danuskoti of Ramesawaram Island during 1964, supercyclone which hit Orissa Coast during 1999 and the Tsunami in India during 2004 reinforce power of nature, even in this advanced age of ours.

Importance of Water

pu°am 18 mentions that water is essential for all organisms and that even a king cannot do anything. It adds that land and water constitute the primary subsistence source, and also implies that god created the world. This piece of thought resembles certain ideas of environmental determinism.⁶ This is attested by the contemporary world, where bitter water-related conflicts are very frequent. The poem argues that those who created water bodies will get the benefits of all the three important elements of life (*a°am*, good deed; *poruḍ*, material wealth; and *iḍpam*, happiness). Those who do not involve in such deeds will not gain fame. Here the poet argues that developmental activity is more important than battles. The poet tells the king to create water bodies and support agriculture. This is an excellent point that is applicable to even today's India, where the contemporary society does not care for tanks, rivers and water bodies and scratches every bit of rivers for sand, dumps all the wastes, and converts rivers, lakes and streams as residential plots.

Seascape

pu°am 2 discusses the Sun as rising in the sea and setting in the sea of the same king, which is a graphic description of reality. Dimension of the sea is often compared with cultural elements. *pu°am* 6 talks about the *pāḍḍiya* army as big as the sea. *pu°am* 20 mentions that the sea is very deep. *pu°am* 3 and 18 describe the land of *tamiḥakam* enclosed by Sea. Here simple description of facts is noticed.

Water Resources

Water is often discussed in the context of the resources and organisms that it supports, e.g. buffaloes, fish and crops. Water filled with fish is portrayed in *pu°am* 6 and 18. Water-less landscape--the dry area of *pālai* land--where there are no settlements are discussed in *pu°am* 3. *pu°am* song 7 says that the country of *karikāla*, is so rich in resources that the breaches in the rivers are filled not with soil, but with fish. The *caḍkam* poems beautifully bring out the interconnectivity of the ecosystem, and presents a holistic perspectives of human life.

Discussions

Water is essential

The texts portray water as an essential element for human survival. The poets realized that a territory without water or the resources within water was not very valuable. Perhaps this is the reason why water is considered sacred in Indian tradition.

Nature and human characteristics

Often nature's perceived characteristics are compared with the human characteristics. Parallels are drawn from the nature to inculcate certain values within the society. By using the nature, the poets could convince the kings or the chiefs. This was a kind of strategy adopted by the poets, to persuade the kings to follow certain philosophy.

Love, respect and worship

The poems highlight the love and respect that they had for the nature. Perhaps that is the reason why nature was worshipped by the people in ancient India. However, we lack this perception now, often we go on exploiting the resources, unmindfully, be it river or sea.

Nature Oriented

The *caḍkam* texts are clearly nature oriented. The main reason for this aspect is that those people respected nature and their culture did not clash with the nature, unlike the modern context.

Connectivity, Inter-linkage and dependence

The chain, link, connectivity and interdependence of environmental elements are very appropriately portrayed in the caṅkam texts. Often, water is not discussed independently. It is portrayed with various creatures and the other elements. Similarly even in the discussion of water in a vessel, the poet goes on to describe the source from which it came.

The ancient eco-critics

The poets, who were the intelligentsia of a class, were themselves ecocritics of a high order. Without understanding the ecosystem and the linkages of the natural world, one cannot become an ecocritic. They were good observers of nature and culture or the broader ecosystem. Perhaps, we need to pick a trick or two from these poets in advising the rulers, and to make our world a better place for living.

End Notes

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- ¹ Loretta Johnson. 2009. Greening the Library: The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism www.asle.org/assets/docs/Ecocriticism_essay.pdf.
- ² Chelliah, J. V. 1946. *Pattupattu-Ten Tamil Idylls*. Colombo: General Publishers Limited; Hart, G.L. 1979. *Poets of Tamil Anthologies-Ancient Poems of Love and War*, Princeton, University of Princeton Press; Ramaujan, A.K. 1996. *Poems of Love and War (from the eight Anthologies and Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil)*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press:125-133.
- ³ Srinivasa Iyengar, P.T., 1930. *Pre-Aryan Tamil Culture*. Madras:University of Madras; Ramachandra Dikshitar, V. R. 1936. *Studies in Tamil Literature and History*, Madras: University of Madras; Champakalakshmi, R. 1975-76. *Archaeology and Tamil Literary Tradition. Purātattva* 8:110-122; Subrahmanian, N. 1966. *Sangam Polity: The Administration and Social Life of the Sangam Tamils*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, reprint; V. Kanakasabhai Pillai, 1966. *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*, Tirunelveli:SISSW; Singaravelu, S. 1966. *Social Life of the Tamils: Classical Period*, Kuala Lumpur;Department of Tamil Studies, University of Malaya; Nilakanda Sastri, K.A. 1972. *Sangam Literature: Its Cults and Culture*, Madras:Swati Publications; Zvelebil, K. 1974. *Tamil Literature*, Weisbaden:Harrassowitz; Hart, *Op. Cit.*; Gurukkal, R. 1995. The Beginnings of the Historic Period: The Tamil South (up to the end of the fifth century A. D). In R. Thapar ed. *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan:237-265. Ramanujan, A.K. *Op. cit.*
- ⁴ Srilatha, G. 2007. Dwelling in Place: An Ecocritical Reading of Sangam Poetry. *ICFAI Journal of English Studies*, 2 (4):47-53; Nirmal Selvamony. 2008. Tinai in Primal and Stratified Societies. *Indian Journal of Ecocriticism* 1.1: 38-48; Nirmal Selvamony. 2012. Interrelatedness: Tinai, Ecocriticism and Envirocriticism. *Gandhigram Literary Review* 1.1:61-80.
- ⁵ Several researchers has have criticized the theory of environmental determinism for supporting the cause of racist imperialism. Peet, R. 1985. The social origins of environmental determinism, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 75: 309-33.
- ⁶ Perhaps the poet argues the superiority of farmer (?) over the king.