

THE TAMILS SAID IT ALL WITH FLOWERS

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Plants, trees, creepers and flowers played a vital role in the life of ancient Tamils is explained herein in an interesting manner.

A love of Nature cannot but be engendered in a people that come often in touch with Nature. The influence in fostering and appreciation and love of Nature is mutual between poet and people. The Tamil poets came from the people who as a nation were intimate with Nature, and the people were encouraged in their enthusiasm for Nature by what the poets wrote.

The Tamil learnt to love flowers and plants even from his very childhood. The eldest sons of warriors when they set their eyes on their fathers for the first time, saw them in the panoply of war adorned with the garlands of warfare. It was the custom then that a few days after the birth of the heir, the king, dressed in battle-array which included also garlands of flowers, should show himself to his son, so that the child's first sight of his father might be that of his father as warrior. Such was the love of bravery among the ancient Tamils.¹

Even infants had a few flowers tied to their forelocks which were brushed back to a side above the forehead. The fifth poem in the *Agam* collection speaks of a heroine who went up to her husband about to depart for another country. She was silent; a forced smile broke the pressure of her lips; tears welled up in her eyes. Her entire countenance bespoke a pleading that he should desist from parting. She pressed her child to her bosom and smelt daintily the fragrant flower adorning the boy's hair. She breathed a sigh and the flowers faded-so warm was her breath of anguish.²

* Source: *Collected Papers of Thani Nayakam Adigalar*, Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies, Publication Number 224. pp. 79-90.

The younger children, counted among their toys, little dolls, made out of the petals or pollen-bed of flowers. Children young and old, played games under the shades of trees. Games in which the seeds of fruits or dried fruits themselves formed the indispensable materials of the games.³ Their leisure was spent in the gardens and grooves gathering flowers and leaves of the region, weaving garlands out of them, or preparing the leafy dresses with which they adorned themselves. The garlands were either of one kind of flower or of divers flowers or of lowers interspersed with leaves.⁴ Bathing in the sea, the river, the lake and tanks, was one of the most pleasurable pastimes of outdoor life seen in Cangam literature. Young and old of both sexes dived and swam and played merrily with the surf or with the waves and eddies in rivers and tanks. Even in places or religious pilgrimage, there were large tanks where bathing for sport and pleasure was common.⁵ The *Kurinjippattu* of Kapilar mentions the many way in which girls delight themselves on the hills, their sitting on an eminence prepared as an ambush to drive away the parrots, their raising such cries as frighten the birds in their nests, their sporting in their river whose waters flow from the mountain heights "like white line", and their having dried themselves and their hair gathering flowers on the hillsides. Such pleasurable distractions, sometimes in the company of the hero, were not confined to the hillsides.⁶ In the other regions, except obviously in the *palai*, the young enjoyed themselves in like manner. The *Pattinappalai* gives an account of the *neydal* regions, how the fisher-folk on full-moon days, adorned themselves with the flowers of their own region, played on the beach with crabs and the waves, built castles on the sand, and thus passed the live-long day.⁷ The Kali odes give many an indication of the festive dance under *mullai* bowers and the gay life of the shepherds in the open air.⁸ *Marudam* was known for its aquatic sports. Not only the long descriptions in *Paripadal*, but also other verses reveal a keen appreciation of public baths.⁹ The *Pattinappalai* says that the ritual bathing in the tanks of Puhar were productive of happiness in both worlds.¹⁰

The Tamils had their houses built in beautiful surroundings, in the centre of a garden. Pergolated paths led to the central entrance. It is under these bowers that the young heroine is often pictured as engaged in play. Here too the heroine plants a creeper or plants (often an *Üò-ô*) and waters it daily with her own hands.¹¹ Sometimes, it is a plant that is grown in an earthen jar or flower pot.¹² When the heroine has left home with her lover, these plants that she has

nurtured are among the constant reminders to the nurse of the child now lost to her.¹³

Natural beauty and flowers entered on a preponderant scale in the story of Tamil love. The poets idealize the spots on which lovers meet. The first meeting as developed in Iraiyanar Agaporul where Nature's setting is the most picturesque that one can imagine for the drama of love, is but a development of or a composition of several such scenes in Cangam literature. One of conventional situations in which lovers meet is when the heroine is out in the open gathering *vengai* flowers together with her young companions. It was the custom among children to shout out "Tiger, tigger" in the childish belief that the *vengai* would lower its branches within reach for them to pluck its flowers. The colour of the *vengai* flower which resembles that of the tiger was the cause of the origin of this cry. A heroine, with her companion, plays about the *vengai* with shouts of "Tiger, tiger". A young chief who is out hunting hears the cry and hastens to the place of the cry in the belief that a real tiger has given cause for alarm. "Where has fled the tiger?" he queries in anxiety. The girls hide one behind the other in shyness. 'It is possible that falsehood emanates even from such lips as yours?' he pointedly remarks and hastens away, but not before his eyes have met and spoken with the eyes of the heroine.¹⁴

The *Vengai* tree is closely associated in poetry with love in the mountain region. It presents a very pleasing aspect when in bloom with its golden bunches of blossoms "as finely wrought as the workmanship of the cleverest jeweler" Often its flowers are compared to flames of fire. Its petals strewn on a rock below the tree remind the poet, because of their colour, of a tiger asleep.¹⁵ Its flowering season was considered to be auspicious and was set apart for the public celebration of weddings, and betrothed couples awaited eagerly for it to burst into flower.¹⁶ There is room to believe that, at first, marriages were celebrated under the flowering *vengai*, because it was the shadiest and loveliest tree of the region. Hence its flowering was understood to introduce auspicious days for lovers.

In many a poem the maid urges the hero to get married now that the *vengai* has bloomed, or she consoles her mistress saying now that the *vengai* has flowered her lover will soon return and they will be united forever after ceremonial wedlock.¹⁷ This association of the *vengai* with weddings led to the custom of new brides adorning their hair with these red flowers, and of parents

carrying out deliberations regarding their children's espousals, and of the festive dances taking place on the marriage day, under a flowering *vengai*.¹⁸ A touching poem in the *Kuruntogai* collection speaks of a heroine weeping almost unconsciously as soon as she adverted the *vengai* had flowered, for she realized that of her lover there was as yet no sign.¹⁹

Vengai flowers were among those which lovers preferred to give their beloveds, especially during the period of courtship. They exchanged garlands among themselves.²⁰ The hero himself adorns the heroine's tresses with the flowers he has brought for her.²¹ The chiefs made presents of bouquets of flowers and of leafy-dresses or leafy-girdles to be worn as ornaments around the waist.²² Another flower commonly presented by lovers of the hills was the *gloriosa superba*. In the first poem of *Kuruntogai*, the maid rebukes a chief mildly when he hands bunches of *gloriosa superba* that he has brought from his own hills to be presented to the heroine. She implies by the rebuke that the chief ought to marry the heroine, and thus end the courtship which has been the occasion for gossip in the vicinity. Her laconic statements is in effect, "On our own hill sacred to Murugan, flowers also this clustered blood-red flower", meaning that she rejects his offer of flower to her lady.²³

The heroine on the other hand, once in love with a chief, is desperately in love with all the natural objects connected with her lover with the hills which are his possession, with the clouds that sail over them, with the river or stream that brings the waters of the hills, with the plants and flowers that these waters wash down from the chief's mountainous abode. To a maid sorrowful because of her mistress languishing for her lover, the mistress says.

*Hiterto I consoled myself by gazing at his hill. But now that it is evening.
His hill seems to disappear gradually like a ship that sinks at sea. Hence I
am inconsolable."*²⁴

Again to a maid who wonders if her mistress would be able to support the grief of separation, the mistress says:

*Look at my forehead. The effect of sorrow is no more there. The reason is
that I have beheld his hill washed by heavy, rain, where groups of peacocks
cry in the thick groves, and where the palefaced-monkeys and their little
ones shiver with cold."*²⁵

Nature has objects with which the heroine consoles herself during the absence of her lover. There is another little stanza of Avvai, which is significant in its suggestion regarding the love a heroine has for the hill associated with her lover. The heroine is found to be of poor health be her parents. The mother seeks a woman – diviner to find out the cause. The diviner divines with grains of paddy, and with the help or prayer to the gods announces the cause of her illness, namely, that it comes from Murugan, the god of the hills, and that he must be appeased with the dance sacred to him. To such a diviner occupied in her divination with the grains of paddy, the maid says, “sing not of the gods, but sing the the song of his hill that you have been singing,” so that the parents might understand that she is love-sick.

"Üèõj ñè«÷ Üèõj ñè«÷
 ñù¾, «è£Šðjù ïjªù´f Å%oi™
 Üèõj ñè«÷ ð£´è ð£†«ì
 ÞjÂ´ ð£´è ð£†«ì Üõ~
 ïjªù´f ïð´ ð£@ò ð£†«ì" (Kur:23)

While arrangements are being made for the heroine’s wedding, the maid observes to the heroine that she has bravely borne the pangs of separation. To her the heroine replies that she was able to do so because of the comfort she has derived from a *gloriosa superba* plant washed down stream from the hill of her lover by the night’s rain. She took it in her hands, fondly kissed it many times because it came from her lover’s hill, and planted it in her own garden. The sight of that plant gave her joy enough to a wait with resignation such time as would bring the nuptial day. The mother saw her fetching the plant from the stream and planting it, but said nothing. Even the highest heaven would not be adequate reward for her goodness, was the opinion of the heroine.

"Listen, maid dear. The highest heaven would be small reward for mother. I fetched the kantal tuber that arrived one morning brought by the fragrant stream fed by the evening rain on his hill. I kissed the tender leaves so often that they withered; and I planted it at home. Mother watched my actions but breathed not a word". (Kur. 361)

The wedding ritual itself included the use of petals of flowers and paddy grains. Before the bride was taken to her chamber, four ladies who already had given birth to children, were appointed to strew flowers and paddy grains on the bride and pronounce this greeting.

"May you never swerve from chastity and thus do good, and may you be a partner in life that loves her husband."²⁶

Disappointed lovers too said their disappointment with flower in the later developments of love poetry. They were garlands of the most uncared for flower (e.g. erukkalai, $\hat{a}\frac{1}{4},\hat{e}-\hat{o}$) and mounting *palmyrah* stocks made after the fashion of a horse, they went about proclaiming their grief.²⁷

In daily life too garlands were profusely used, especially when men and women went on their social or religious visits. In the Paripadal occurs a statement that the entire road from Madura to Tirupparang kunram, a distance of about four miles, seemed to be one long garland to an onlooker from the hill, so many were the pilgrims and so profusely had they decorated themselves with garlands.²⁸

The Tamils said it with flowers not only in love but also in friendship, in hospitality and even in relief of poverty and want. When strangers passed through a village they were offered flowers as a sign of friendliness.²⁹ When poets and minstrels went to kings and chiefs to sing their praises and obtain relief in want, they were not only given elephants and lands and silks, but lotuses made of gold. It was the custom for the patron to present the head of the band of minstrels or dancers with a lotus' of gold. Sometimes the gift consisted of flowers made of gold fastened together by bands of silver.³⁰ These musicians adorned even their musical instrument with garlands of flowers.³¹

During periods of mourning, flowers and garlands were not used by the Tamils in adorning themselves or the other objects which they were wont to decorate with flowers. Poverty and suffering too were causes for abstaining from the use of flowers. Among the many poems rich in pathos is an elegy on the death of a chief in which the poet turns to the blooming jasmine with pity and asks, "Wherefore bloomest thou when none will wear thee?" The poem, incidentally, mentions the many occasions on which flowers were worn:

*"The youths will have thee not. The banded-damsels will gather thee not.
The bard, to adorn his lyre's handle will receive thee not. The songstress
will wear thee not. After Sattan of the strong bow who killed many a foe
and showed his prowess, is no more - O mullai dost thou bloom yet in
Olliyur's land? (Puram, 242)*

Society, at the time of the composition of these poems, was hard on widows. They had to sleep on a bed of stones, and eat the rice of the white water-lily (Ýð™) and fast and mourn their lot, or burn themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands. A royal poetess says that it were better to die on the same pyre as her lord than to lead such a life, so different from the one she led with her lord. To her, he says, after her lord's death, the cool waters of the lake where lotuses bloom and the raging fires of the pyre are the same. She will throw herself into the fire with as little concern as she would into a bathing pool.³² Another widow, a poetess herself, who leads this penitential life prescribed by social convention, has a quatrain of simple beauty in which she addresses the water-lily. The poem is so fragile in its tender suggestiveness that I dare not risk a translation. It means, however, that it is sad indeed that the water-lily which in the youthful days of the poetess served for her leafy ornaments, now that her husband is no more, should offer the grain which recalls to her a life of abnegation and loneliness.

" ÜOò î£«ñ CÁªõœ ÷£ð™
 P-÷ò ñ£è^ î-òò£ Jù«õ, PQ«ò,
 ªð¼õ÷, ªè£¿î ñ£œ%ªîùŠ ªð£¿¶ ñÁ^
 F;ù£ -õè ½¶µ^ç
 Ü™LŠ ð'à^ç 1™ô£ Jù«õ" (*Puram*; 248)

We have seen the use made of garlands and flowers in warfare, and the different flowers that signified different strategic movements. It remains to sum up briefly those customs connected with Nature which have not been mentioned so far.

Each king and chief had a tree which symbolized him and was called his guardian tree (è£õ™ ñó^ç). He seems to have planted his outer defences with many trees of that species, and any king waging war against another was supposed to score a great victory over his enemy and disgrace him if he could penetrate into the forest defences of his enemy, and cut down his symbolic tree. Thus the margosa tree was the "guardian tree" of Palayan' and the punnai of Titian. It was also counted an act of defiance and bravery, if a king tied one of his elephants to the "guardian tree" in the forest defences of his enemy.³³ The story is narrated of the poet Satanar who went to receive a poet's gifts by singing the praises of a chief Veliman by name. Since Veliman was resting, he refused to see 'the poet but ordered his younger brother to give a few gifts to the poet. The

latter was niggardly in his giving. The poet refused his gifts, went to the chief Kumanan and having received ample presents which included one or more elephants, he brought one of them, and tied it to the "guardian tree" of Veliman, and harangued him thus in his presence:

*"You are not one that gives or protects those who seek help; but neither are patrons wanting to those in need of succour. Learn then that there are those in want, and that there are those who meet their wants. The mighty elephant that I have tied to your "guardian trees" in the defence outside your castle, is a gift. O chief of the swift horse thus do I return."*³⁴

To spite an enemy king, there was also the custom among victors of making use of the timber of the "guardian trees" of their enemy chiefs or kings, for the wooden part of the drums that were used by their armies in proclaiming their victories.³⁵

Besides these "guardian trees", the three kings of Tamil Nad, the Cera, the Cola, and the Pandiya had a flower each as his own emblem, just as the lily, the rose and the flowers have been taken as emblem of royal houses in the West. The *atti* flower was the emblem of the Colas, the *palmyrah* flower of the Cera, and the *margosa* flower of the Pandya. A poet in addressing two of the Cola family who were fighting among themselves for the Cola throne, appeals to them thus with the hope of offering a reconciliation:

*"You are not one who wears the white garland of the lofty palmyrah's flowers (Cera), nor wear you the dark-branched margosa's garland (Pandyan). I wear the atti's garland; so does he who faces you in battle. None of you is defeated, it is the House of Cola that is defeated."*³⁶

When a king went to war, he wore garlands made of his royal flowers, as well as the flower that signified the particular kind of warfare in which his troops and he were going to engage.

Garlands of the flowers emblematic of the royal houses were used also to decorate the royal standards. In the graphic account of Pandiyan Nedunjelian visiting the wounded at mid-night, it is said that the general who preceded him pointing out the wounded soldiers one, by one, carried a halberd around which was wound a garland of margosa flowers.³⁷

Further, certain stories that gradually formed part of the folklore of the Tamil people were such as to fire the imagination of poets and people in favour

of love of Nature and animals and birds.³⁸ There is the story of Pari, one of the seven chieftains renowned in Tamil history for his liberality. He found one day a jasmine creeper lying athwart his chariot path. He would not ride his chariot over it, nor would he allow it to grow unsupported across the path. He abandoned his chariot so that the plant might creep on it for support. This tender munificence towards a plant was the subject of poetic praise as the most characteristic act of his life.³⁹ There was Pehen who came in for equal praise because he found a peacock shivering with cold, and with gesture more gracious than that of Sir Walter Raleigh, covered the peacock with the silk mantle with which he was himself covered.⁴⁰ A story is recounted of birds in the person of *Ay Einan*. He was so much a lover of birds and their protector, that when he fell in the field of battle, all the birds formed a canopy with their out/ stretched wings to protect him from the rays of the sun. And, it is added in the poems, that the owl was stuck with grief at its own want of vision during the day for it could neither see Ay and his wounds, nor join the other birds in providing shelter.

There is an anecdote concerning Kapilar, a poet who has written many a beautiful line of *Kurinja* poetry. His great patron and friend was Pari, the chieftain who lent his chariot to a jasmine creeper. Pari's liberality was such that he gave away the revenue and ownership of the three hundred villages of his chieftaincy to poets and minstrels that had gone to him for help. The Parambu hill region alone remained for his own income. Such was the fame and prowess of Pari that it excited the rivalry of the three kings of Tamil Nad who besieged his rock fortress. Kapilar was with Pari within the fortifications when the siege took place. The poets narrate how Kapilar trained birds to go out of the fortifications and harvest the paddy in the fields. They brought the sheaves in their breaks, and thus helped those who were besieged to tide over the scarcity of food that the siege had caused.

A love for the ideal in Nature was fostered by art and handicraft. Ori's hill, Kollimalai (அஃஃஃஃஃ) had on its western slope the sculpture of a goddess which was so lovely to behold that persons who viewed it were entranced by its beauty. The beauty of a heroine was compared by poets to the beauty of the statue on Ori's hill.

There are many indications in Cangam literature of the highly developed state of the Fine Arts among the ancient Tamils, and these include several references to the influence which a love of Nature exerted on the architecture,

painting and music of the Tamils. It is on these references that P.T.Srinivasa Iyengar based his conclusion: "This same love of Nature was the cause why they beautified their tools, their houses, their furniture, and their vessels with carvings imitative of creepers, leaves, flowers and animals."

Notes

1. *Puram* 100
2. *Agam*, 5.
3. *Kur.* 48: *Nar.* 3,2-4; 79, 2-3; Cfr. *Nar.* 68, 155; *Puram*, 176
4. The leafy-dress also had flowers interwoven with leaves.
5. *Paripadal* 9, 61
6. *Aing.* "1ùò£†'Š ð^¶" 71-80; *Paripadal*; Poems on Vaiai
7. *Pattinappalai* 1:39: "P¼è£ñ^ F-í «òK"
8. *Nar.* 79.1 : "P™ªòç ðò-ò" 305, 4 ð£®ò ðò-ò *Agam* 89,21
9. *Agam* 165,11 " î £N, ¶-÷ ð£' ñð~ Å†®"
10. *Nar.* 110;305
11. *Agam* 48,52
12. *Puram*, 202, 18-21 " P¼ç¹LòKŠ ¹øç è',ª "
13. *Pari*, 14, 11-12; *Agam* 12
14. *Agam*, 2 ; *Kali*,38 , *Nar*, 206, Cfr, *Agam*, 378
15. *Nar.* 313; *Kali*, 42; Cfr, *Kur*, 241
16. *Nar.* 241
17. *Nar.* 313
18. *Kur*, 312,5 " Å%oi™ «ðœ%oi Mò¼ ñð~ àF~%oi¶"
19. *Kur.* 214. Cfr, *Kur*, 333, 342; *Pari* 6, 66
20. *Kur.*1
21. *Kur.* 240
22. *Kur.* 249
23. *Agam*, 86. Even the image of the god which was used for the marriage ceremony was made of petals of flowers, and laud on the tender *Vahai*- flowers and grass. See *Agam*, 136.
24. *Kur.* 17; 182; *Nar.* 220; H.T. p. 170.171.
25. *Pari.* 19. 15-18.
26. *Malaipadu.* 428 ff.
27. *Porun.* 159-60; âKò-è%o îjù «õ® ø£ñ-ó

èKJ¼' H^-î ªð£Lò,, Å†®

- Perumban*;481-482; *Malaipadu*, 568-569; *Puram*, 12, 1;29, 1:69;4-21;26,1-3; *Kali*, 55,2; 85,2
Puram,11, 18
28. *Puram*. 242. 2-3. " ªðœO ï£ó£Ÿ ÌŠ ªðŸPC«ù"; 153. 7 -8.
29 *Puram*, 246
- 30 *Patir*, 33,3; *Puram*, 57,10-11; 162,5-6; 336,4
31. *Puram*. 162.
32. *Patir*.,11, 12-14: 17. 5: *Agam*. 347. 4-5.
33. *Puram*, 45. 1-5.
34. *Nedunalvadai*. 176 f.
35. See introductions to texts.
36. *Puram*. 200. 9-11: 201,2-3: *Sirupan*, 87-91.
37. *Puram*. 141, 10-12; 145, 1-3; *Sirupan*. 85-87.
38. *Agam*, 142. 181. 208.
39. *Agam*, 78. 303.
40. *Kur*. 89, 100; *Agam*. 62, 13-16. 209, 15-17; *Nar*. 185, 6-11.