

Chapter 2

AINTHINAI: THE FIVE REGIONS OF THE TAMIL COUNTRY

The five regions of the Tamils and their adoption as a form of **spatial organization for Tamil society** form the backdrop for a discussion of the traditional knowledge systems of Tamil Nadu, Southern India. This chapter is an elaboration of how the geographic thought of the Tamils influenced their knowledge systems and how people worked them into their poetry to describe their culture and life. The source for the chapter is the Sangam literature of *Agam* (inner space) as well as *Puram* (outer/external space). The chapter highlights the *Thinai theory*, the Tamils' traditions, and especially the *Ulagam* or the world and the knowledge that thrived, fostered and continued. The conception of humans and environment, in the past and the present, is explored.

The Philosophy of Tamils

The raft is of no use to itself but it helps others to ford the stream. It has lost its self and it is there only to serve others. The raft is serviceable to anyone, who needs it, without any distinction of caste, colour, creed, race or country. The raft is thus a magnificent symbol of universal humanism.

Universal humanism is the philosophy of life of the Tamils. The Tamils were bent upon discovering the value of human existence nearly two thousand years ago. For them, the realisation of kinship and equality of mankind had the greatest ethical and spiritual value. In their wisdom, the problems of good and evil, misery and happiness, and life and death had engaged their attention. Their thoughts and conclusions have been skilfully woven into a poem by an astronomer-poet, Kanian Poongkuntranar: *every town is my town and every person is my kin*. A very profound philosophy, which may be typified as universal humanism.

In the words of Kothandapani Pillai, when man looks into himself, the evolution receives an ethical and spiritual transformation. His self or ego vanishes. He becomes an embodiment of dedicated selfless service to humanity, which the raft represents.

The raft has to cross the perilous waters of the stream. Man is also caught up in his responsibilities, from which he cannot escape. This concept of responsibility is similar to that expressed by Jean Paul Sartre, one of the leaders of modern existentialism. He states that:

I am abandoned in this world not in the sense that I might remain abandoned and passive in a hostile universe like a board floating on the water but rather in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility, without being able to tear myself away from this responsibility.

The responsibilities from which man cannot tear himself away are many and varied. The Tamil poet treats them under four heads: *responsibility for the self or the individual, for the family, for the society and for universal humanity*. He does not prescribe the course of conduct to be followed in the discharge of these, but narrates them as the course of conduct followed by his countrymen. He speaks in the first person plural 'We' as a representative of his countrymen.

Thiruvalluvar, a poet of some 2000 years ago, sings in chapter 22 of his *Kural*, about knowledge of oneness or equality, He states that:

*Benevolence as duty to humanity seeks no return.
What does the World give back to the clouds, which immensely benefit it (Kural 211).*

He further states that:

*If ruin will be the result of benevolence to humanity
better court it even by offering yourself for sale (Kural 220).*

There is no better and more emphatic way of insisting upon humanism or universal human love. And such is the tradition of the Tamils, now and in the past.

The Tamils

Archeological evidence suggests that Neanderthals lived in South India from 500,000 to 40,000 years ago. Homo sapiens, who came into being 100,000 years ago in Africa, reached South India 60,000 years ago. Numerous migrations occurred by land and sea, between Africa and Oceania prior to 10,000 years ago. South India was in the centre of this region. Details of these ancient migrations can never be reconstructed. But this much is certain: the earliest Homo sapiens inhabitants of South India were the Negritos and Austro-Asiatics or Asian-Australoids. Indeed, the racial and cultural bedrock of all South and Southeast Asia is provided by these aboriginal peoples, a number of whom (the tribes of Tamil Nadu: the *Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyas, Paliyans, Kadirs, Kanikarans, and Vedans*) continue to live in the Western Ghats. There are also cultural similarities, including the practices of animism and shamanism, and the use of boomerangs.

Beginning 8,000 years ago, aboriginal peoples were joined in South India by the ancient Tamils. According to the most commonly-held academic theory, the ancient Tamils were of the Eelamite people, based in the eastern Mediterranean area, especially in the territory of present-day Iraq. The Eelamites were among the world's first agriculturalists and urbanists. Over the centuries, the Eelamite civilisation spread eastward. The Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa sites, in present-day Pakistan, were of this civilisation.

The ancient Tamils were taller and had thinner noses (*leptorhine*, thin; *platyrhine*, broad) than the South Indian aboriginal peoples. Little is known about the interaction between the ancient Tamils and the aboriginal peoples of South India, other than that some of the latter retreated to the Western Ghats, where their descendants have remained to this day.

About 4,000 years ago, there existed on the sub-continent a culture with kings, courts, urban centres, and irrigation systems. It was at this juncture that a branch of the Aryan people, who originated in what is today known as the Caucasus area of Russia, arrived in India. The Aryans spoke Sanskrit, and had light skin and thin noses. Their general term for the peoples they found in the sub-continent was *Dravidians*.

Ancient Tamil well-describes the people derived from the Eelamites, but it does not acknowledge the presence of the aboriginal peoples. South Indians have now been divided into four major modern states and languages, and *Dravidian*, a Sanskrit term, describes them as a whole. Incidentally, of the four major southern languages, modern Tamil is the least Sanskritised.

The Aryans smashed the ancient Tamil urban centres and irrigation systems, and imposed a hierarchical form of racial segregation, later to be known as the caste system. The earliest strata of Sangam poetry portray an *optimistic secular view of life* in a heroic (prefeudal) age of meat-eating and wine-drinking. Religion centred around worship of the goddess in her myriad forms (for example: *Kotravai, Palaiyol, Kanamar Selvi, Kadu Kihal*) and of her son Murugan, in rituals involving dancing (*Kuravai, Thudi, Vallikuthu*) and the sacrifice of cock and goats.

In South India, ancient Tamil rulers and languages remained dominant. About 2,500 years ago, three dynasties had come into being: the Chola (east), Pandya (central), and Chera (west). Buddhism and Jainism, associated with trading and urban groups, were important factors from 2,300 to 1,800 years ago.

There was extensive trade on both coasts of South India: ancient Greeks and Romans visited, as did Arabs and Chinese. A Tamil word, *yavana*, described foreigners who were employed by the South Indian kings. Christianity made an early appearance: Christ's disciple, Thomas, is said to have died in Santhome of the present day Chennai. A settlement of Jews was created on the west coast. Islamic Moghul rulers made some headway in the South beginning 1,200 years ago, but never really dominated it.

Beginning approximately 1,600 years ago, the Tamils began to colonise Southeast Asia, bringing Hinduism to Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. About 1,300 years ago, *bhakti* (devotional) practices originated in the South and indeed swept across all of India. It stressed love for, and mystical union with, the divine and was typically expressed in songs. With the *Age of Discovery* came the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British traders. All of this is to say that South India, surrounded on three sides by the sea, has had lengthy and varied traditions of cultural and material exchange with distant lands.

An essential part of the British project in South India involved sedentising the population, so as to be able to administrate more easily, and to collect taxes regularly. They attempted, with much assistance from middle and upper class Tamils, and to discredit, marginalise, and even criminalise those who resisted settled agricultural life. The British tended however to support the cultural centrality of large temples. In these ways, the British lowered a bureaucratic grid of systemisation and codification. The South Indian diaspora is very much a middle and upper class. This diaspora presents an excellent opportunity for multi-sited ethnography.

The Tamils have had a deep, ancient regard for the natural world. There has been, in our current historic period, an intense debate over the status of wilderness regions and non-human species. In the past, it has put poets on the alert for insights into nature or wilderness that distant artistic traditions might offer, and the best Tamil poems hold something instructive here. Rooted and steeped in tradition, the Tamils balanced a fine-tuned eco-literacy with a cosmopolitan delight in language, social patterns, and sexuality.

There's good evidence that the Tamil tradition of the southern India used *landscapes* in their classical poetry and this tradition went into the later Sanskrit classics as well, from the somewhat earlier Tamil tradition of the south. Classical Tamil poets (circa 100 B.C.E.-250 C.E.), writing in a Dravidian tongue, devised for their intricate, interior-based short poems an alphabet of natural elements, which they calibrated to distinct *Landscapes*: what we now call *bioregions*. By invoking the name of a plant or animal native to a certain habitat, they would summon an image at once natural, cultural, and resonant with a particular emotion.

The Tamil Country

The personality of the **Tamil country** is a result of its geography and that of its people, religion and history. The Tamils have shown a sharp geographical interest in the five-fold land features they have devised to fuse with the conventions of classical Tamil poetry. It is because Tamil Nadu, unlike the rest of India, has had fewer vicissitudes of fortune and long periods of political peace and stability. This has ensured, particularly in the rural areas, a continuity of tradition, which has often made people remark that the Tamils, even the urbanites, are conservative. However, it is perhaps this conservatism that has kept alive the Tamil country in its **unity in diversity** of the land and the people.

The Tamil Region

The Tamils have had a definite idea of the **Tamil region**, the geographical limits of which form a clear cut demarcation. Early Tamil literature of the Sangam Age (circa 200 A.D.) describes the Tamil region as having extended from Vengadam (Tirupathi-Tirumalai) in the north to Kumari in the south and between the two seas on the east and the west. There is also a tradition that a large tract of Tamil Nadu in the south of Kumari, ruled by the Pandyas with *Kapatapuram* as capital and a river known as *Then Kumari* were swallowed by the rising sea in pre-historic times.

Professor Tirunaranan in a 1938 paper of his states, on the other hand, that:

Its boundaries have defined with reference to its physiographic characteristics, its plant cover, the relationships between them, and their influence on the distribution of cultivation, of habitations and of communications. The limits thus determined agree fairly well with the limits of the cultural unit, as shown by the distribution of the Tamil language, the traditional limits ascribed to the Tamil region..

The Tamil region is the southern section of the east coast lowlands of peninsular India, to the south of Pulicat Lake. The edge of the Deccan plateau is represented by the discontinuous members of the Eastern Ghats, which run more or less parallel to the coast in the regions north of Pulicat Lake. The Tamil region includes the low, slightly undulating

coastal plain, the valleys of the Palar, the Cauvery, the Vaigai and the Tamiravaruni, the many intervening hills, some of which adjoin the plateau forming its dissected and isolated outliers and the smaller valleys lying between them. Sixty-five kilometre north of the city of Chennai is the linguistic boundary between the Tamil and the Telugu speaking areas. This is the extreme northern limit of the Tamil region. The western limits are set by the irregular and the broken edges of the Deccan plateau, at the Nilgiris, and along the south of the Palakkad gap by the steep, forested but much denuded slopes of the Anaimalais and the Cardamom hills. In the south of the Cauvery delta, the coastline progressively reduces the width of the lowland till it ends at a narrow passage at the southernmost tip of the peninsula, between Cape Comorin (Kanyakumari) and the southern limit of the Cardamom. But the boundary thus defined includes within the Tamil region some small areas of the modern State of Kerala - the Attapadi forests and portion of the Palakkad gap, and excludes parts of districts in Tamil Nadu adjoining the Mysore plateau.

The Tamil Language

Pronounced *Thamizh*, the language of the Tamils (Zvelebil, 1974; 1992) has a special claim of being classical and at the same time vigorous and modern. Its history can be traced backwards to the time of *Tholkappiyam*¹, the earliest extant Tamil grammar ascribed to 500 B.C.E. The classical period of Tamil literature is known as the *Sangam Age*, commencing before the birth of Christ and this Age continued for three or four centuries. It is dated between 500 B.C.E. and 200 A.D. Although a considerable part of the early Sangam literature has been lost, some of the bards and patrons had preserved a part of it in certain anthologies about fourth century A.D. The classical Tamil literature has been anthologised into 36 books. They are also divided into groups according to their subject matters. The first 18 books, called as earlier eighteen (pathinen mael kanakku), talk about the life style of the people, while the later eighteen (pathinen keel kanakku) converse about the moral life. The eight anthologies or *Ettuthogai* and the ten *Idylls* or *Pathuppattu* are the earliest extant literature of the Tamils. Of the poets who had written the anthologies, some 473, including 30 women, have been identified.

The Sangam literature, which is bound by literary conventions, has been divided into two themes. They are the *agam* or esoteric dealing with love and the *puram* or exoteric dealing with war. The five-fold features of Tamil geography have been fused into the poetic conventions. The themes of love with respect to the five-fold features are union (*kurinji*), patience (*mullai*), sulking (*marudham*), wailing (*neidhal*), and separation (*palai*). The poet dealing with a certain aspect of love confined himself to a particular region, season, hour, flora and fauna. The literary conventions for poetry of this nature are explained in the *Tholkappiyam*.

Purananuru, a collection of 400 verses on exoteric themes, serves as a window on the Tamil people 2000 years ago in the same way *Agananuru* with 400 verses on the esoteric theme does. There are of course other collections of Tamil literature such as *Natrinalai*, *Kurunthogai* and *Paripadal* and they are quite well known. *Thirukkural* with 1330 couplets in 133 chapters of 10 couplets each, by *Thiruvalluvar*, is the greatest Tamil classic expressing the most profound thoughts on the many problems of life. This classic is sung in three books dealing with Virtue (*Aram*), Wealth (*Porul*) and Pleasure (*Kamam*).

There are two epics in Tamil, sung round about the third century A.D., namely, *Silappadhigaram* (the story of an anklet) and *Manimegalai* (the story of Manimegalai). *Kamba Ramayanam* is an immortal classic in the language. This is a rendering of the *Ramayana of Valmiki* and yet it is different in its plot, construction and delineation of character. Tamil is rich also in devotional literature, notably of 64 *Nayamars*, the exponents of Saivism and 13 *Alwars*, the exponents of Vaishnavism.

The Tamil literature became highly developed and the poets were respected under the patronage of the three dynasties, which ruled the Tamil country: the *Chera*, the *Chola* and the *Pandya*. The capital of the Pandya kingdom, Madurai, was the seat of the Tamil Sangam. In centuries between the thirteenth and the eighteenth, Tamil literature has been influenced by the Muslim and Christian impacts. The Christian influence began with the Portugese and continued with the French and the British and these have made significant contributions to Tamil as well. The twentieth century has produced many literary works. Subramania Bharathi is the greatest poet of modern times and he inspired the Tamils with his patriotic poems dealing with personal freedom, national liberty and fundamental equality.

There is much in common between the life of the Tamils and that of the people of Indus civilisations, before the great flood. The relics of Tamil language are apparent in Bruhi, a dialect of Balichistan. It is almost generally accepted that the Tamils must once have inhabited northwest India or had close contacts with the people of that area. There is also something in common to both Tamil and Japanese is now being asserted. The Tamils have a history that goes back certainly to some 6000 years or more.

Literature, Life, and Kingship

From 2,200 to 1,800 years ago, the third Tamil Sangam, an *association of poets and scholars*, flourished, based in the city of Madurai. The first two Sangams are ascribed to earlier times and are likely to have existed primarily in legend. Most of the Sangam poems, engraved on hard palm leaves, were rediscovered 100-150 years ago. There are eight volumes of short poems (known as *Ettuthogai*) and ten volumes of longer poems (*Pathuppattu*): in all, there are 2,381 poems written by 473 poets. Recent translations have brought some of this material to a wide English-reading audience (Hart, 1975, 1979, 1999; Ramanujan, 1984, 1994). Included in the corpus of Sangam literature is Tholkappiar's *Tholkappiam, preservation of ancient wisdom*, the earliest known Tamil work of phonology, morphology, grammar, and literary analysis. There are also five literary epics, which were written in slightly later periods. The most important of these is the central epic of the Tamil people, the *Silappatikaram* (anklet story), the Epic of the Anklet, which, according to linguistic analysis, was written between 1,800 and 1,400 years ago.

Sangam literature paints a picture of a cosmopolitan, trade-oriented, and tolerant society: the three leading ideologies of the day - Brahminism, Jainism, and Buddhism - co-existing in harmony. The Epic of the Anklet is ascribed to Ilango Adigal, a Jain monk: the story's heroine and her husband are of a merchant caste. In the centre stage are the aristocratic young men and women, questing for heroic action and love. The human condition, albeit idealised, is the subject matter. Spirituality, religion, and mythology are peripheral. It must be remembered that this literature is of an urban, courtly milieu.

The *Tholkappiam* discusses the distinction between *akam* and *puram* poetry. *Akam* poetry pertains to love and romance. It is written in the form of conversations between participants, often voicing participants' thoughts and feelings, with the heroine's female friends and relatives playing supporting roles. No names, places, or dates are mentioned. *Puram* poetry, on the other hand, pertains to matters of state, primarily war; and here specific historical and geographical references are appropriate. *Akam* and *puram* are often mingled in a single poem, as in one in which a wounded but victorious young man rushing home from a distant battlefield imagines his love waiting for him.

The institution of kingship was central to ancient South Indian culture. The tradition of justice in ancient South India decreed that a king should inflict upon himself whatever injustices he had inadvertently inflicted upon others, and there are many stories of this occurring.

Numerous scholars have speculated that Sangam poetry is derived from the oral tradition. As mentioned, the poets, in the poems, often self-consciously pattern themselves after oral bards. Much of the Sangam poetry is formulaic, which lends further credence to the likelihood that the oral tradition was close at hand. It seems that during the Sangam age, there was lively interaction between the oral and literary traditions.

Nature in the Life of the Tamils

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.

The Tamils had their houses built in beautiful surroundings, in the centre of a garden. Beautiful bower-paths led to the central entrance. It is under these bowers that the young women are often pictured as engaged in play. Here too, the woman of the house plants a creeper or plant and waters it daily with her hands (*Agam*, 48; 52). Sometimes, it is a plant that is grown in an earthen jar or flower pot (*Puram*, 202, 18-21; Cfr. *Kural* 47). When the woman has left home for her husband's home, these plants that she has nurtured are among the constant reminders to the household of the child now lost to them (*Pari*, 14, 11-12; *Agam*, 12). Natural beauty and flowers entered on a preponderant scale in the story of the Tamils. The poets idealised the spots where people in love meet. The first meeting as developed in *Iraianar Agaporul* where Nature's setting is the most picturesque that one can imagine for the drama of love, is but a development or a composition of several such scenes in *Sangam* literature (*Agam*, 2; *Kali*, 38; *Nar.* 206. Cfr. *Agam*, 378).

The Tamils Said It All with Flowers

Love of Nature cannot but be engendered in a people that come often in touch with Nature. The influence, appreciation and love of Nature is mutual between poets 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. Besides love, there was war. The Tamil, according to poets, have learnt to love flowers and plants even from 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 (*Puram*, 100). Even infants had a few flowers tied to their forelocks, which were brushed back to a side above forehead. The fifth poem in the *Agam* (or interior) collection speaks of a heroine who went up to her husband about to depart for another country. She stood silent while a forced smile broke the pressure of her lips; and 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 faintly the fragrant flowers adorning the boy's hair. She breathed a sigh and the flowers faded - so warm was her breath of anguish (*Agam*, 5).

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, in which the seeds of fruits or dried fruits themselves formed the indispensable materials of the games (*Kural* 48; Narrative 3, 2-4; 79, 2-3; Cfr. Narrative 68, 55; *Puram*, 176). Their leisure was spent in the gardens and groves, gathering flowers and leaves of the region, weaving garlands out of them, or preparing the leaf dresses with which they adorned themselves. The garlands were either of one kind of flowers or of flowers interspersed with leaves (*Pattinappalai*, 11; 5; 105). Bathing in the sea, the river, the lake and tanks, was one of the most pleasurable pastimes of outdoor life seen in *sangam* 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 of religious pilgrimage, there were large tanks where bathing for sport and pleasure was common (*Kalithogai*, 1; 49; 3; 75; 6; 47).

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 jeweller." Often its flowers are compared to flames of fire (*Nar.* 313; *Kali*, 42; Cfr. *Kur.* 241). 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 flowers (*Nar.* 241). 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.

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 dance taking place on the marriage day, under a flowering *vengai* (*Kur.* 312, 5).

The chiefs made presents of bouquets of flowers and of leafy-dresses or leafy-girdles to be worn as ornaments around women's waist (*Kur.* 249). Women were desperately in love with all the natural objects connected with their men, with the hills which are their possession, with the clouds that sail over them, with the rivers or streams that bring the water of the hills, with the plants and flowers that these waters wash down from the chief's mountainous abode. Here is a poem that tells us of a woman's sorrow:

Hitherto 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 (*Kur.* 17; 182; *Nar.* 220; H.T. p. 70, 171).

There is another little stanza of Avvai, which is significant in its suggestion regarding the love a woman has for the hill associated with her man. Also:

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 (Kural 361).

The Tamils said it with flowers 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 friendship (*Puram*. 246). 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 (Patir, 33, 3: *Puram*, 57, 10-11; 162, 5-6; 136, 4). These musicians adorned even their musical instrument with garlands of flowers (*Puram*, 162).

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 and asks, "Wherefore bloomest thou when none will wear thee?"

Besides the guardian trees, the three kings of Tamil Nadu, the Chera, the Chola, and the Pandya had a flower each as their own emblems, just as the lily, rose and other flowers have been taken as emblems of royal houses in the West. The *atti* flower was the emblem of the Cholas, the *palmyrah* flower of the Chera, and the *margosa* flower of the Pandya.

Ainthinai Theory: The Five-Fold Landscapes or Bio-Regions (Kurinji, Mullai, Marudham, Neidhal, and Palai)

The composition of *porulathikaram* (a chapter on *porul*² or economics; the third chapter of *Tholkappiyam*, where it renders a reading of *sangam* literature) is considered a product of the extraordinary, mystical knowledge system of ancient Tamil society. The vast corpus of *sangam* literature inevitably requires the assistance of *thinai theory* in the interpretation of the knowledge system and its social relevance, in the past, now and in the future. Tamil scholarship can be classified as believers and non-believers. The articulatory mode of the believers, filled with emotions, has socio-cultural and political repercussions for the contemporary Tamil situation. But that of the non-believers, on the other hand, opposes the ideas of the believers and concentrate on the content and form of literature, with guidance from *porulathikaram*. Either stream of thought however fails to problematise the composition of *porulathikaram* rather than engaging in a dispute regarding its historicity (Dharmaraj, 1998; also see Ramachandran, 1979; 1980).

The theory of semiotics in *Tholkappiyam* provides enormous freedom of reading (as it can be read as an ancient text and as a book; see Dharmaraj, 1998: 88). It allows the reader to transgress the text horizontally and vertically. It allows him the liberty of treating *thinai theory* as an interpretation of *Tholkappiyam*. The interpretative voice of a grammar (for

Tholkappiyam is also a grammar book) implies the chances of multiplicity and it is, in the words of Dharmaraj (1998: 89), congenitally democratic and overwhelmingly particular.

The *Tholkappiyam* theory of linguistics suggests that in this book of grammar everything begins with the five rudimentary elements: soil (*nilam*), water (*neer*), fire (*thee*), space (*vali*) and air (*katru*). The five do not manifest themselves in pure forms but in various combinations. This fusion is what creates the physical reality. They fuse to create living and non-living things. Tamil linguistics is interested in investigating human perception of the beginning of the Tamil mind, the nativity of knowledge. It is also interested in building a systematised conceptual reality in response to the physical reality. The interaction of human intellect with the physical reality leads to an evolution of meaning and this causes ignorance to vanish. The human mind is therefore perceived as an entity processing the attributes of the physical world in order to understand it. In the process, natural objects are perceived as objects that have no visible, knowable, apparent cause and effect. As such it becomes a grammatical fallacy when an attempt is made to explicate the cause and effect of natural objects. On the contrary, cultural objects have definite causes and effects to describe. *Tholkappiyam* maintains that words are constructed in response to the creation of meaning. The words accomplish a tremendous deal in manipulating the semantic structure. This formulation leads humans to the basic understanding of language as an aid to thinking and conceptualising.

When knowledge is created about an object or a group of objects, the human mind is empowered, enabling humans to identify and locate objects and, in some cases, even recreate them (Dharmaraj, 1998: 94). The conceptual reality of the human subject becomes the nucleus from which all the explanatory strands propel and converge. And in the conceptual reality of the Tamils, to cut the long events short, entire humanity is taken as a single, unified subjectivity belonging to higher species (*uyarthinai*) while the rest is taken as another larger subjectivity (*agrinai*). In the semantic distinction between *uyarthinai* and *agrinai*, bipolarity is consciously avoided.

Conceptual reality, it must be emphasised, is a pragmatic compulsion. It is this reality that evolves into a system of knowledge or a work plan to manipulate the physical world successfully. Reciprocity in the accumulation of the knowledge system and its expression becomes a handy tool. But there are two constraints in reciprocation: its *close relationship with experiences* and its *abstract nature*. The physical reality is however grasped at three different levels, namely: the auditory (*isai* or music), signficatory (*kurippu*) and intellectual perceptual (*panbu*). It is the words of the last level that stand for ideas and concepts, while the words themselves are formed from the first (auditory) and the law of tradition from the second.

Thinai theory is the rationale of *sangam* poems. Theorising is done in a multiplicity of ways, like contriving a classificatory method, constructing a conceptual universe, an interpreting it. The *thinai* concept was first introduced in *Tholkappiyam* as a model to interpret the *sangam* texts. Its transformation into a theory came much later. It is actually the adoption of the concept of *thinai* by all commentators of *Tholkappiyam* that finally transmuted the model into a theory.

The idea that the Tamil community is a linguistic community encompassing composite cultures is eloquently captured in those creative works where the subject matter

love (*agappadalkal* or poems of the interior) is understood as a cognitive expression. The expression often strives to overthrow cultural variances between different kinds of tribe and clan, which are employed in diverse modes of production. In the *thinai* theory, the concept of love is divided into seven ideas each. Love may be *kaikilai*, *kurinji*, *mullai*, *marudham*, *neidhal*, *palai*, and *perunthinai*. The first and the last are culturally proscribed. Whereas *kaikilai* is the unrequited love, *perunthinai* is the love between a child and adult. The other five are predominantly used in *thinai* theory as the subject matter. These five varieties of love comprise of three sub-elements, namely, *spatial and temporal markers*, *thematic markers*, and *objects as markers*. All three are present in a poem, except *palai* that has no spatial marker. The three markers are also synchronised at the level of semantics. That is, the cognitive perception of a particular spatial and temporal marker coincides with the thematic marker vis-à-vis the object as marker. The conglomeration of these harmonious markers constitutes the ideas ranging from *kurinji* to *palai*.

The Tamil poets identified thus the **five wilderness regions**, which we would call montane (*kurinji*), riparian meadow (*mullai*), forest (*marudham*), littoral shoreline (*neidhal*), and arid desert (*palai*). Each landscape set the scene for a particular poetic mood. Plant companions are so abundantly featured in Tamil poetry that A. K. Ramanujan's good book of translations (1970), *Poems of Love and War*, includes a botanical index.

The five may be treated as the five-fold regions the poets have devised for literary treatment of Tamil culture and life. The Tamils used **thinais** as the word meaning **regions** or **earthscapes** or **landscapes**. The thinais were a reflection of the life in the respective landscapes and they were named after the most significant flora. They are:

- **kurinji** or *Lawsonia spinosa* for montane;
- **mullai** or *Jasmiium trichotomum* for pastoral;
- **marudham** or *Terminalia alata* for riverine;
- **neidhal** or *Nymphae alba* for littoral features; and
- **palai** or *Minusops hexandrus* for arid.

The Kurinji

Kurinji is geographically related with hill ranges and their adjoining areas. Temporally, however, it is identified with the rainy season and midnight. The temporal and spatial markers of the *kurinji* provide for the topographical fabric of the songs. The object marker discusses the anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic elements used in the songs. The object markers are indeed people, deities, flora and fauna, musical instruments and so on. The people of the *kurinji* region are hunters and gatherers. The third marker, the thematic, is the essence. This links the other two markers. The thematic marker speaks of the nature of relationship between the hero and the heroine. The thematic value for *kurinji* is togetherness. In each other's presence, the lovers are totally oblivious of the outer world and the dangers and threats from it. The hills that are topped by mists, the rain that emanates from the cool breeze, and midnight are all conducive to privacy and togetherness.

The *Mullai*

The *mullai* follows the cognitive sphere of *kurinji* in all the three markers. Its topography is dense tropical forests and the adjoining areas. It is associated with winter and the evening. The dominant mode of production is pastoral. The deities, food practices, organisms, people and their musical instruments are associated with the pastoral life. The thematic marker is the patient waiting for togetherness. The three markers support one another, in *mullai*, in both the physical and the conceptual worlds. 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 (*Nar.* 79, 1; *Agam.* 89, 21).

The *Marudham*

This *thinai* is spatially associated with the plains and temporally with the dawn. The associated way of life is dominantly agrarian. The thematic value is the quarrelsome relationship between the couple in love. *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 (*Agam*, 165. 11). The *Pattinappalai* says that the ritual bathing in the tanks of Puhar (a seaport) were productive of happiness in both worlds (Narrative 110; 305).

The *Neidhal*

It is topographically associated with the seashore and the sea and temporally with the afternoon. The associated way of life is fishing and trade. The thematic value is anxious waiting of a lover for union. The *Pattinappalai* gives an account of the *neidhal* 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 life long day (*Pattinappalai*, 1; 39).

The *Palai*

The early Tamils did not recognise *palai* as a separate entity, since it is only the result of reduction of both the mountains and the forest or the pastoral regions. This *thinai* has the topographical illustration of wasteland and temporal representation of winter at its peak and midday. Banditry is the associated way of life. The thematic value of separation of the lovers operates as the conceptual marker of the poetic theme *palai*.

The *Ulagam* or the World

These five regions were deliberately sung as the *Ulagam* or the World by *Tholkappiyar*, the author of *Tholkappiyam*. This is perhaps because the early Tamils recognised such regional classes not just for Tamil country but also for the world. Conversely, *Tholkappiyar* may have meant that each of the five regions is as compact as the world in itself.

The Tamils' Spatial Organisation

The Tamils have also thought of the **spatial organisation of their society** as well. This they have embodied in the three-fold classification of *mudal*, *karu* and *uri*, which

literally mean the prime or the *source*, the embryo or the *nucleus* and the belonging or the *possession*, respectively. In their conception, each of the five regions has this trio as the basis for its literature. The *mudal* or the prime consists of space (place) and time. In the Tamils' minds the marriage of the two is the source of social, economic and other activities. Further, they had divided time into two major divisions: the *sirupozhudu* or the short time and the *perumpozhudu* or the long time. The two had been further divided into six subdivisions each. While the first stands for the 24-hour day, the latter stands for the seasons: *kar* or winter or early rainy season, *kuthir* or autumn or late rainy season, *munpani* or early winter or early dewy season, *pinpani* or later winter or late dewy season, *ilavenil* or early spring and *mudovenil* or late spring.

The *karu* or the regional features consist of the flora and the fauna and religion. The ancient Tamils in fact put in under this division flora and fauna as the produce of the *mudal* and also included humans with all the activities and even God as the produce of the *mudal*. It must be mentioned that in Tholkappiyam, the list of things under *karu* (the produce) or factors of environment can be yet another expansion, beginning with God and ending with music.

It is in the third that the Tamils founded the excellence of pragmatic spiritualism. The *uri* consists of love and character. It is the character of the human soul, which is its real belonging or possession. It is indeed based on their understanding of the concept of *uri*, the Tamils have spoken of *behaviour*. Thus in the three-fold classification of *space-time*, *activity* and *behaviour* the Tamils have found their spatial organisation of the Tamil society. It is interesting also to know that the Tamils were deeply conscious of the fundamental factors of geography as the bases of their culture and life; indeed land, time and produce as well, which according to them, moulded the very character of the human soul.

The Tamils' Influences Elsewhere

The Tamils have also influenced other cultures. Sanskrit poets, following the traditions of the Tamils, for example, used this type of alphabet for their own lyrics (320 C.E), introducing the kind of attention to seasonal changes in various bio-regions that has been the stuff of natural history, and superimposing on the natural orders a sophisticated psychology of human life. Regional plants, weather patterns, bird migration or animal behaviours, and seasonal cycles were all used emblematically; yet the poems lend sound testimony to Ezra Pound's counsel that "*the natural object is always the adequate symbol*".

In Tamil lyric, the human and non-human orders seem linked in daily, beautiful intimacy: Local villages with birds in flowering trees; the whiff of odours from a nearby forest grove; farm land crops or native grasses in fertile alluvial soil; and sweet-smelling blossoms along a village path. To put it another way: what flowering creeper shares the details of your life because you walk past it every day to fetch water? What pliant reed did you collect one spring night to weave a mat for your lover?

It was through the holy books of Sanskrit that one encountered a world full of thunder and wind, craggy metaphysics, humorous folklore, tingling insight, and they felt like poems. There was also a classical tradition of poetry, secular, tenderly amorous, refined, instructively nature-literate lying in wait. Their poetry, says Kosambi, "necessarily carries

with the rank beauty of an orchid the corresponding atmosphere of luxury, parasitism, decay."

There is however no explicit scholarship to cite, but the way the Tamil poets continually and accurately named their trees, creepers, rivers, mountain ranges, and weather patterns reveals a magical habit of language. Recurring in endless variants, phrases like "newly opened jasmine" and "black clouds mount the horizon" did not originate as descriptions of nature, but the spells set loose to summon the spirits controlling these events. The poetic handbooks, which were carefully consulted - their exacting rules cover not only grammar and metrics but also natural history - have similar roots. They keep watch over the local calendar: animal migration and fertility, plant growth, weather cycles, and river flooding.

After a lapse of two thousand years, the poets of classical Tamil took up the old energies and redirected them, bringing the poem to focus on human affairs. The archaic grain was not lost; the innovation was simply to lay patterns of human life across the old mythic orders. From this perspective, most collections of classical poetry are ritual accounts of the Indian year. The short poems come down to us in anthologies ranging from collections of a hundred lyrics to over four thousand.

A quick glance shows the anthologists ordered their books by seasonal and diurnal cycles, and patterned both alongside or on top of the rounds of human life: erotic, social, and biological. You can therefore read the anthologies as almanacs. The habits of animals, the tree groves, the seasonally flooding rivers, clouds gathering over the mountains, the fragrant blossoms, as in so much old poetry, these are the good companions, while spirit guides on the human journey.

While the allocation of particular landscapes to particular emotional genre and employing the woman in love (*thalaivi*) with a caretaker (*ceviliththay*) were idealised, the *feelings* portrayed were not removed from reality. Otherwise, it would not make sense. The reason well-to-do personages were employed was that only with such personages could one bring out all the nuances of the domain of love just as with matching season, time of day, and terrain. Allocation of emotions to landscapes is not all that synthetic either: it has been in Tamil roots. One is amazed to see repeatedly how *neidhal* (or being on the beach) was associated with sadness when it has to be *palai*. With the five cultural landscapes, the Tamils could focus also on a very concrete or tactical aspect of the global picture. If we take a very cynical or negative view of the society, and we could do the same of an individual, then there is no end to the pain in life but it is not correct either.

Constancy or dependability and consequent sense of security for everyone around in a family with a woman becomes the foundation of good society. A.K. Ramanujan, Professor at Chicago University, translated *Kuruntokai*. In his opinion, any translation of Tamil poetry must not ignore two very strict observances in the original. First, there is the scheme of conventions, known as *ainthinai*, which Ramanujan has translated as "five landscapes", and secondly, the prosody which is a highly organised form of a system of metrics. Ramanujan however ignores this in all his translations, preferring to adopt the free-wheeling "structures" (if one might call them that) of contemporary free verse.

Ramanujan says that no Tamil poet speaks in his own voice, and no poem is addressed to a reader. The reader only overhears what the characters say to each other, to themselves, or to the moon. A poem in this tradition implies, evokes, enacts a drama in a monologue. " [Ramanujan 1970: 112] Agam poetry aspires to be impersonal and secular, almost all poems - excepting those deliberately composed as belonging to *thinai mayakkam*, that is, as a mixed variety - fall under one of five stages in the love life. To cite an example: The poet Kapilar manages to evoke a particular event in a specific landscape, which is charged with tense and fearful emotions, and doubt and anxiety. He shows the indifference of nature to the indiscretions and violence in man, where the phrasal cultural collocations of the original knock into each other successively, building as it were into a crescendo of feeling. The feeling explodes in the last phrase with the deflowering of a slip of a girl, reinforced by the image of a heron searching with its beak under running water for lampreys which, as you know, are eels with large suctorial mouths.

Women

In South Indian culture, women are considered very powerful. A married woman is auspicious: her *sakthi* (divine cosmic energy) protects and animates her husband and their children. A girl's *sakthi* benefits her parents and siblings. A traditional South Indian ideal is that a girl should marry her mother's brother or his sons. The principle is that a woman's marriage home should be as close to her natal home as possible, both in terms of kin and geography. This practice gives social power to women.

Dravidian cultures tend to give social and mythological prominence to females, and that the overwhelmingly patriarchal cultures that arrived from the North (Brahminism and Islam) have not taken hold in the South nearly to the degree that they have in the North.

Village Religion

A cornerstone of South Indian culture, contributed by aboriginal peoples and ancient Tamils, is the sense that the divine is immanent: it is in anything and everything, and can spring up at any moment. This South Indian animism developed from the association of special trees, plants, animals, stones, and other objects with local divinities. Moreover, South Indian village religion revolves around ancestor-, nature-, and local goddess-worship. Village deities are typically represented by stones whether carved or uncarved.

South India is famous for her village goddesses. Many of these figures were once, according to legend, local women. Some village goddesses are "married" to Sanskritic gods, but many are not. The single, or virgin, goddesses are considered capricious, hot-tempered, and mercurial: sometimes the line between central deities and peripheral spirits is not clear. Sanskritic culture presents its divinities as timeless, transcendent, distant, calm, and benevolent: as Sanskritic goddesses are portrayed on the South Indian village level, these deities become aggressive and dangerous.

In its practices of animal sacrifice and its stories of goddesses who often kill males in fury, South Indian village religion points to a cyclical sense of time and matter: children of the goddess grow, become her consorts, and die. In South Indian versions of the pan-Indian myth of the goddess killing a buffalo-demon, the buffalo-demon is actually the thinly-disguised figure of the goddess' own divine son-consort-husband. This is rationalised

away in Sanskrit culture, which claims that its gods created the goddess in the first place, in order to have her to defeat a buffalo-demon who had temporarily gotten the best of them. Moreover, local goddesses are related to in the context of a crisis-oriented worldview: that is, when personal or community disasters occur, people call on the goddess. Local goddesses are also celebrated during annual festivals, which are co-ordinated with agricultural and seasonal cycles. Dravidian legends and myths are extremely place-centric.

Puja is the characteristic Dravidian form of worship. It consists of a fluid complex of activities, including the drawing of *kolams* (designs with rice flour, but now powdered chalk); the pouring of liquids over, and the placing flowers on, the deity stone; the offering of gifts; and the singing of praise to the deity (and other forms of storytelling). Deities are believed to demand attention, and *puja* attempts to please the deity by summoning her into the idol and into the worshippers' body.

Notes and References

1. Historians have dated *Tholkappiyam* between the second century B.C. and first century A.D. It is a gorgeous composition of three extensive treatises: *Eluththathikaram* (the alphabet), *Chollathikaram* (the words), and *Porulathikaram* (both the literary tradition and the *thinai* theory). The first book, on the alphabet, deals with subjects ranging from the production of sounds to the changes of sound patterns in usage. The second book, on the words, deals with elegantly enunciating the constitution of morphemes, the sums and substances of nouns and verbs. The third book has two sections: one the poetic conventions of Tamil literary tradition, and the other the *thinai* theory. See Kamil Veith Zvelebil 1974: *Tamil Literature*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz. Also Kamil Veith Zvelebil 1992: *Companion Studies to the History of Tamil Literature*, New York: E.J. Brill, Leiden.
2. The Tamil signifier *porul* has in fact three signifieds, namely, *the object, the meaning and the wealth*.

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