

Floral Pathways into Eco Next Media for Eco Cultural Resilience

by Dr. A. Santha – Aug 25, 2019

For Indians and that too for the Tamils, flower is a way of life and a mode of communication. To their deities they offer flowers and garlands to express devotion. A Tamil husband is expected to offer jasmine to his wife as a mark of their conjugal love. Garlands are presented to elders, leaders and winners as a sign of respect, recognition and appreciation.

In ancient Tamil culture flowers are given a very significant place. The Sangam poems are broadly divided into two major classifications, Akam (love poems) and Puram (war poems). Both these categories are further divided into seven sections each. The first five divisions of love poems – Kurunji (Neela Kurunji), Mullai (Arabian Jasmine), Marutham (Indian Laurel), Neithal (Water Lilly) and Palai (Pala Indigo Plant) stand for five different stages of mutual love between the lover and his lady love. The sixth one is Kaikkilai representing one sided love. The last category of the poems called Perunthinai is about mismatched love. Strikingly the first five are named after flowers, they being “Anbin Ainthinai” (the five love categories). The other two are considered derogatory and hence they are not given the names of flowers.

In the second major category Puram, poets sing about the lives of men out side home, especially about the types of wars waged and victory thereafter. Out of seven war categories six are named after flowers. They are: Vetchi (Scarlet Ixora) – Provocating war through cattle raids, Karanthai (East Indina globe thistle) – Defending against cattle raids, Vanchi (Rattan Palm) – Invasion of enemy’s territory, Uzhingai – Attacking fort, Thumbai (Bitter Thoombay) – The war front, Vaagai (Siris tree) – Victory, Paadaan – Praise of the winner(1).

The soldiers wore the respective flowers while heading for the war for which they were called for. Even today if someone wins a game or attains any kind of success it is customary to say “he/she wore Vagai flowers”. This reminds one of the popular usage “To win laurels” representing the Ancient Greek custom of presenting a laurel wreath to the winner of the Pythian game.

The five kinds of landscapes referred to in Sangam literature are named after the flowers – Kurunji, Marutham, Mullai, Neithal and Paalai. Besides the grammatical work, Yaapperungalakkarigai, names of flowers and flowering trees are used to explain different syllable combinations for different poetic meters – Thema (Mango), Pulima (Tamarind), Koovilam (Bael) and Karuvilam (Butterfly pea).

Sangam poems stand testimony to the integral part flowers played in the lives of Ancient Tamils. Poet Kudavayil Keerathanar (2) in an elegy to a great warrior, addresses the flower Mullai and says :

Young man do not wear them! Women wearing bangles
do not pluck them ! The bard does not bend gently with
the stem of his yaazh, to pluck them to wear! The singer does
not adorn herself with them! O jasmine wine! Do you
Still bloom in Ollaiyur, after Sathan with a strong spear
who prevailed over warriors with his manly strength, died? (Purananuru 242)

This poem reveals several cultural practices of which two are relevant to the present context.

1. Men also used to wear flowers like Mullai,
 2. People did not wear flowers when they were mourning somebody death.
- The ancient Tamils treated plants, animals and birds on par with humans. Paari one of the seven great patrons, was so generous that he gave away his chariot to a climber plant when he saw that it was struggling to grow without a suitable support. Pekan yet another patron once when going around his country, sees a peacock shivering in the rain and cloaks it with his gold laced silk robe (Purananuru 145).

In one of the poems of Sangam period poet Kabilar gives an amazing list of 99 flowers. The list includes the flowers of various trees creepers, thorny shrubs, water flowers, flowers of herbal plants, flowers of spices and the like. The content of the poem is as follows:

‘After a refreshing bath in the water falls and springs the heroine with her friends collects an immense variety of flowers, weaves them into the colorful costume and adorns herself with it. And the hero who appears there with his hunting dogs and sword is also described as wearing a floral wreath on his head which is made of four kinds of flowers found in the mountain, land, trees and springs. In addition he was wearing the flower of Ashoka tree on his ears. In this poem Kabilar explains the way of Tamil’s life to an Aryan king Prahathan.’

In Thirukkural, the icon of Tamil culture Thiruvalluvar compares the soft and sensitive flower Anicham with a woman’s feet. Anicham and Swan’s feathers hurt like the thorny plant Nerunjil on the tender soul of the woman.(Thirukkural 1120)

Religious and Yogic significance of flowers:

In India lotus is considered a divine flower. Lakshmi the Goddess of wealth is believed to be seated on a pink lotus and Saraswathi the Goddess of learning is believed to be seated on a white lotus. According to mythology Lord Muruga (Karthikeya) was born out of six lotuses. Hindus believe Lord Bramha is seated on the lotus located at the navel of Lord Vishnu. Above all lotus has a Yogic meaning – referring to the Sahasrara Chakra, the thousand petaled lotus. Flowers such as lotus, Hibiscus and Pavala Malli (Parijatha) are considered so sacred that humans are not allowed to wear it.

Aandal (7th century), the chief deity of Srivilliputur (a small town about 72 kms from Madurai), the only women of the 12 Vaishnavite saints (Alvars) is known for wearing the garland meant for Lord Vishnu. While the girl’s father Perialwar was bewildered to see her hair on the mala Lord Vishnu loved to wear it and ultimately he marries her. Even today the garland worn by the Goddesses Aandal is presented to Lord Venkateshwara at Tirupathi during Brammotsavam. This garland has got a specific shape. It should be at least 10 feet long on either side and it is not joined in the middle.

The status of flowers in Tamil culture today:

Though the love for flowers continues to exist in India as well in the state of Tamil Nadu there seems to be a paradigm shift in its consumption. The ancient Tamils not only expressed their feeling and emotions through flowers but they also used flowers as a medium of communication to show the kind of attack or defence during the war. Flowers were also worn to symbolize victory. In the present day most of the native flowers are forgotten excepting the Idiomatic expression “Vetri Vaagai Soodu” – To win a game or elections or any other victory for that matter.

Even today it is customary for a married woman to wear jasmine flowers in the evening. In traditional families it is mandatory. In some close-knit families the women goes to her maternal house everyday in the evening just to adorn herself with jasmine flowers. However these days young girls and adolescents avoid wearing flowers and it is considered rustic. Now a days it has become part of the bridal makeup and an accompaniment for the saree. In temples the garlands worn by the deities are given as Prasad to worshipers.

However Tamil Nadu has become a hub for floriculture. The state ranks first among the flower producing states of India. It occupies 25 % of the country's flower production. Cut flowers are cultivated in Hosur, Nilgiris, Kodaikanal (both upper and lower Palani hills) and Yercaud of Shevroyan hills.

Madurai has one of the biggest flower markets in India. The major flowers traded in this market include varieties of jasmine, rose, Crossandra, tuberose, Nerium, etc. The flowers arriving at this market are generally produced within a radius of 25km from the city(3).

The country's first centre of excellence (CoE) for cut flowers was inaugurated at Thally near Krishnagiri in December 2017. Set up under the Indo-Israel Agriculture Project (IIAP), it was unveiled by Gil Haskel, head of MASHAV, Israel's agency for International Development Cooperation. The centre trains flower growers, entrepreneurs and extension officers on high-tech cultivation of commercial cut flowers suitable for Tamil Nadu. Creation of a hub to strengthen supply chain management of flowers is one of the main objectives of the centre.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

As people, as policy makers, as a government and as a media what can be done to create awareness about the significance of the flowers specific to the Tamil land? . There are several ways of doing it. A few are suggested here:

1. A huge ECO Media lab can be created with all the trees and plants listed in sangam literature. Flowers specific to each type of landscape – Kurunji, Mullai, Marutham, Neithal and Paalai can be featured in different sectors of the park. Similarly flowers pertaining to Chola (aathi), Chera (Palm flower) and Pandya (Neem flower) kings may also be suitably exhibited.
2. Awareness about the significance of the flower Vaagai can be created. In any function celebrating a victory the winner may be decorated either with wreath of Vaagai or a garland made of Vaagai.
3. A new market may be created for flowers like Anicham mentioned in the love poems of Sangam period on the Valentines day.
4. In Tamil Nadu the title of the film is in tamil language there is a tax waiver. On similar lines some incentive or recognition can given to the children if they are named after native flowers .
5. In a film Poovelam Ketupar the popular Tamil actor Surya reels out a list of 100 flowers to his girl friend. The list includes almost all the flowers mentioned in Kurunji Paatu. Surprisingly this is well received and very much appreciated by the Tamil community. Similar efforts may be encouraged.
6. Schools, Colleges, Government Institutions and parks in residential areas and in public places may be encouraged to plant native species of trees.
7. Brain storming sessions, Seminars and Symposia and completions may be organized inviting fresh ideas.