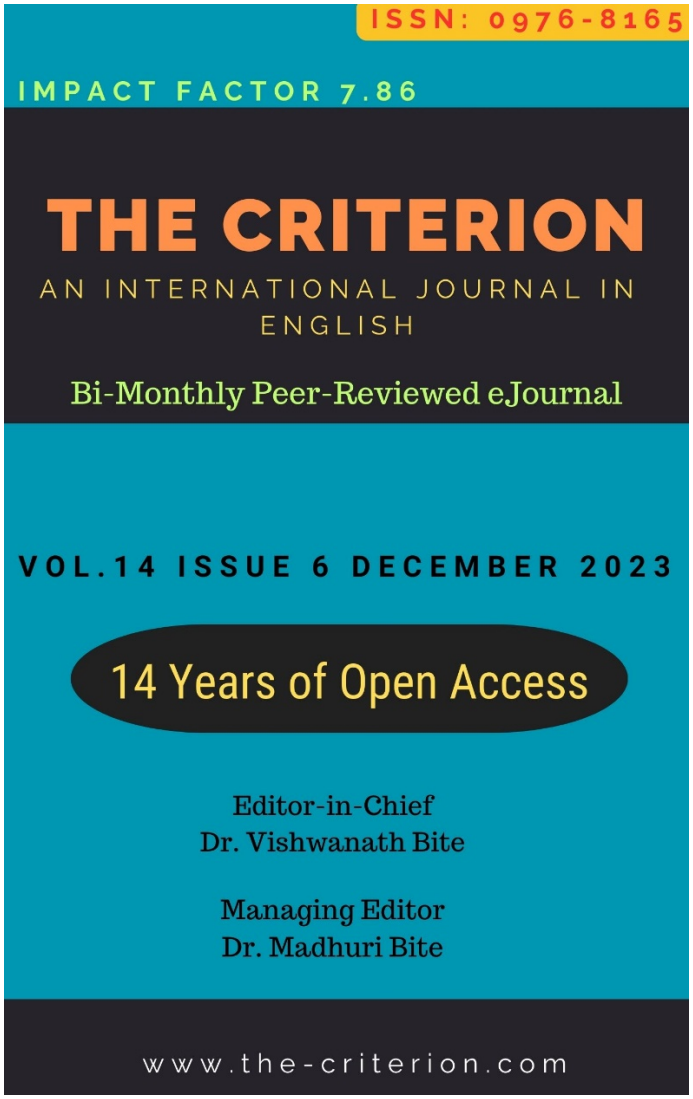

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Seeking a Future in the Past: The Socio-Ecological Significance of *Tinai* in the Anthropocene

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Article History: Submitted-24/11/2023, Revised-19/12/2023, Accepted-20/12/2023, Published-31/12/2023.

Abstract:

The paper refers to the analysis of the 2000-year-old Tamil *akam* poetry done by critics such as A.K. Ramanujan and R. Radhakrishnan, as well as to Nirmal Selvamony's ecocritical framework of *tinai*, to assess how these poems integrated the now violently sundered realms of nature and culture. Considering the poetics as a reflection of the societal practices of the time, the paper looks at the ecological implications of the arrangement of the human and the nonhuman in an interdependent relationship as opposed to a strict hierarchization. Keeping in mind present-day ecocritics' advice to turn to religion and indigenous traditions for lessons on how to relate to our environment, the article shows how the *tinai* society's way of life aligns perfectly with this cause. In the process, this article takes into account criticisms of landscape-based arguments' adjacency to fascist, nationalistic ideologies and offers counterarguments that acquit the *tinai* framework of such prejudices.

Keywords: Landscape, *akam* poems, *tinai*, ecology, ecocriticism, nature, culture.

Introduction

A trend has emerged in modern environmentalism, highlighting the role played by religion in cultivating nature consciousness. Eminent writers, thinkers, and philosophers such as Amitav Ghosh and Lynn White[1] credit religion with the ability to bring people together to act selflessly and with conviction. These thinkers advocate a unified front of religions, while also drawing from age-old traditions that go farther back than the emergence of institutionalized religion. The keyword here is tradition—one that is not necessarily didactic or value-oriented but evolved as a performative response to living with nature. As American environmentalist Bill McKibben puts it, "…buried in plain sight throughout our various traditions are myriad clues and suggestions about how we might live more lightly on the planet" (301). By piecing together these clues and decoding the rituals, without dwelling on meaning

and reason, we may be able to nourish our current movement towards an interfaith approach to the environmental crisis.

To find the "clues and suggestions", one may study practices themselves, or take recourse to old texts. One such body of work, comprised of poems written over 2000 years ago, is known today as Sangam literature. This paper attempts to look at how this classical Tamil text incorporates nature at the literary or textual level while metonymically capturing the exterior landscape to reflect the interior one, in a manner that inextricably binds nature to culture and the nonhuman to the human.

Sangam poetics: An overview

The name 'Sangam' (academy, fraternity) came as an afterthought to refer to a vast body of work written in Tamil. Although there are several myths surrounding its origin, it is now known that the entire corpus was composed over four centuries about 2000 years ago, with 473 poets (either named or given epithets) contributing to it. These poets belonged to three different *sangams*, with each period turning out its collections of poetry. Most of these works have been lost, and the extant ones belong to the third *sangam*. The grammar treatise *Tolkappiyam*, which contains the key to the highly codified and structured poetry of the Sangam corpus, was written in the second *sangam* period.

The remaining works are divided into two sets of eighteen works each. The former is further categorized into eight anthologies (*Ettuthokai*) and ten long poems (*Patthupattu*). They were composed over a while, from 100 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. The anthologies have 2381 poems in all, although several are missing or are available in a corrupted form. It must be noted that the poems were not anthologized at the time of composition; this happened centuries later. However, their arrangement into anthologies is logic-based and enables one to make sense of the various themes, moods, settings, and situations (*turai*) that the poems embody. The broadest and most important basis for the division of the poems is their type: *akam* and *puram*, and the types of landscapes in each.

Akam and *puram* are complex words that have a multitude of meanings and stand in opposition (though not without a few correspondences) to each other. The host of meanings associated with *akam* includes the interior, heart, mind, self, household and family, kin, earth, etc. *Puram*, by contrast, comprises the exterior, body surfaces, others, field and the yard, non-kin, the farthest oceans, etc. In this compilation of poems of love and war, *akam* poems talk of love, and *puram* poems, of war. Within this classification are further divisions. For the broader

objective of this paper, I shall only look at *akam* poems, whose classification is more definitive and has a bearing on what I began with—nature consciousness.

The Tamil system of constructing a poem puts in place two "first things" which constitute the *mutal*: time and place. Next come the "native elements" or *karu*, which, as the name indicates, are the things that are native to the region. This does not just include natural flora and fauna but also the people (tribes), arts, and culture endemic to the region. This element of the poem makes a significant statement against the nature/culture divide, which it rejects in favor of a continuum that also lends itself to a concentric metonymical structure. (This part will be discussed in detail later.) The third and final element is *uri*, which refers to the corresponding inner landscape of the human character—his/her feelings, experiences, and actions. Together, the *mutal*, *karu*, and *uri* make up the *akam* poem. Consider this example from the *Kuruntokai* anthology, translated by A.K. Ramanujan and included in his *Poems of Love and War* (henceforth PLW):

What She Said

In his country of cool seas, they say,

on the screwpines with hanging roots
fat buds unfold
in leaves
like the wingfeathers
herons preen with their beaks,

and on the front yards
of his little seaside town
set in a grove
the long waves come and go.

Though he has left
he is close to my heart,
living far away
in his country of cool seas.

Ceyti Valluvan Peruncattan
Kuruntokai 228 (47)

The place here is the seaside where the beloved man lives. The elements native to the seashore are the long waves, the screwpines with hanging roots, the herons, and the fat buds. It culminates in the heroine's inner mood: the feeling of holding her lover close to her heart, even as she anxiously waits for him. The inner landscape (*uri*) often reflects the outer one (here, the sea separating the lovers). One can also observe here a tendency that A.K. Ramanujan points out: a movement from the abstract to the concrete, from the outer world to its native elements to inner experience. According to him, this is typical of *akam* poems in the original, even if they're not always visible in translations. This progression is not random in the least; the abstract expansiveness of the sea becomes metaphorical (though not explicitly—which, according to the *Tolkappiyam*, is discouraged) of the lovers' separation. Even the *karu* elements contribute to this enactment of human experience: the "long waves" come and go, just as the lover has come and gone, and the shore—like the girl—waits anxiously for their return. None of the elements are chance images or mere backdrops; the characteristic features and behaviors of the plants, animals, landscapes, etc. actively play out the human experience when it is not explicitly stated. With no explicit comparison and with just what is called an "inset" (*ullurai uvamam* in Tamil), human actions and experiences of the *uri* are enacted and captured by the elements of *karu* which are native to a broader, larger *mutal*.

Here we arrive at the basis for another major classification of *akam* poetry[2]. Based on the landscape of the poem, the native elements in play, and the dominant mood or experience, there are five[3] major types of landscapes and corresponding types of love: *mullai*, *kurinci*, *marutam*, *neytal*, and *palai*. The names belong to a characteristic flower or tree that is specific to each region. For *mutal*, the places associated with each of them, respectively, are forest and pasture, mountains, countryside, agricultural lowland, seashore, and finally, desert or wasteland, which can also be parched mountain or forest. The dominant *uri* or types of love corresponding to each are patient waiting for *mullai*, lovers' union for *kurinci*, lover's infidelity and the sulking beloved (or concubine) with *marutam*, anxious waiting for *neytal*, and separation with *palai*. In addition, each landscape—or *tinai*, as it is called—comes with its own set of *karu* or native elements, including birds and beasts, plants and trees, and even occupations of the people.

The type of poem can thus be discerned by analyzing these various elements. (Although the divisions are usually strict and distinct, some elements can overlap, one landscape's elements can be used in another's setting, etc.) About the interrelationship between elements within a landscape, Ramanujan writes:

> In this world of correspondences between times, places, things born in them, and human experiences, a word like *kurinci* has several concentric circles of meaning: a flower, the mountain landscape, lovers' union, a type of poem about all these, and musical modes for these poems. But its concrete meaning, "a mountain flower" is never quite forgotten. (PLW 241)

Nature in *akam* poems

There is a reason this compilation is said to be highly codified and requires an equally thorough grammatical treatise to unravel its implications. None of the elements mentioned above, whether structural or thematic, are mere symbols or emblems. R. Radhakrishnan explains in "A Note on a Contextual Grammar of Semantics: The Tamil Tradition" that

> …no poem could be said to be a pure description of nature, though there are several such poems. On the contrary, from the flora and fauna and the like referred to in a poem, an interpretation must ensue involving human participation, though such a participation is not explicitly indicated in it. (17)

This is better seen in Ramanujan's description of *kurinci* correspondences as "concentric circles of meaning". This is significant because it is one level at which the nature-culture binary is overridden, made irrelevant, or even inconvenient (since it would not allow for the structure that is integral to this tradition). The natural outer world contains human actors and their practices and is in turn ensconced by (and enables) their occupations and preoccupations. As Ramanujan suggests,

> In it, nature and culture are not opposed but consubstantial; together they make meanings possible, each containing the other in paradoxes of metonymy… A landscape (*tinai*), in the Tamil definition, is both a place and a mood; to speak of one is to evoke the other… one sees that the nature/culture opposition is itself a culture-bound notion. For cultures like the classical Tamil, "nature-culture," a hyphenated continuum, seems to make better sense. (PLW 286)

The *mutal-uri* or *karu-uri* correspondence is not the only level at which the nature-culture merging occurs. The inclusion of natural as well as cultural elements within *karu* itself speaks of a lifestyle that does not separate human relationships, occupations, arts, and practices from other naturally occurring elements. Food sources coexist with waterbodies (and are of course, dependent on them); native music is mentioned alongside native birds and beasts; time

of day and year often indicate or dictate specific human action. Most importantly, the characters involved (the girl, her friend, foster mother, etc.) are aware of these influences and speak of them with an insider's knowledge. Below is a *mullai* poem, whose *uri* is patient waiting for the lover's return:

What She Said

Only the dim-witted say it's evening
when the sun goes down
and the sky reddens,
when misery deepens,
and the *mullai* begins to bloom
in the dusk.

But even when the tufted cock
calls in the long city
and the long night
breaks into dawn,
it is evening:

even noon
is evening,
to one who has no one.

Milaipperun Kantan
Kuruntokai 234 (PLW 67)

Mullai's allotted time of day is the evening—and it is this that influences the mood of the lonely girl. Conversely, her mood influences her perception of the time of day—noon becomes evening in the gloom of her loneliness. The sky turns a deep shade as does her misery, and in the dusk of her sadness, the native *mullai* blooms. Moreover, it is the girl herself who acknowledges these temporal and physical changes in external attributes, while reflecting on her internal landscape.

It follows from here that the poet (who has no textual role except for the name or epithet inscribed at the end) is highly trained in the identification of various aspects of nature—ranging from seasonal shifts to crop yield, from native animals to regional vegetation. This is required if, as discussed before, human action is to be encoded in the natural behavior of elements of

karu. For instance, intimate knowledge of crabs and crocodiles native to *marutam* is essential to make a comparison with the deceiving lover. This is a specific type of deception—one involving betrayal of the very people one has sworn to protect (the beloved and her family), and this detail is perfectly played out by the animals' act of eating their young. Here is Ramanujan's take on the scientific acumen of Sangam poets:

> …these poets knew their fauna and flora: their botanical observations, for instance, are breathtakingly minute and accurate. In these poems, over two hundred plants of all the five Tamil regions are named, described, used in insets and comparisons. Root, stem, bark, bud, petal, inflorescence, seasons, special kinds of pollination, etc., are observed and alluded to. And their properties are aptly used to evoke human relationships. (PLW 249)

As an instance of this meticulousness, he cites the use of the *kurinci* as the symbol of the mountain landscape and concomitantly, of first love. It is because "a *kurinci* plant comes to flower only from nine to twelve years after it is planted—this identifies it with the tropical virgin heroine who comes to puberty at the same age." Furthermore, "*Kurinci* plants flower all at once on the mountain slopes, covering them with millions of blossoms, certainly a great symbol for the suddenness and the overwhelming nature of first love" (PLW 250).

There is a certain humility that comes with this kind of attention to detail. It is also a mark in favor of scientific knowledge of the empirical world as it only fortifies the poetry of the aesthetic natural world and is, in turn, made more valuable and relevant by it. This complements well the tendency of Sangam poetry to unify the exterior and interior landscapes; it creates a pathway for the flow of meaning between the two, generating a poem that stands alone as a whole, all its elements intact and indispensable. Present-day environmentalists and ecocritics levy accusations against science and the utilitarianism it seems to encourage by reducing the natural world to an object of study. While certain technologies and scientific inventions do hand us the knife, the damage caused cannot wholly be blamed on the very act of accumulating the knowledge whose misuse (and not simply its existence) is destructive. As for the microscope depriving the flower of its aesthetic appeal, this is what Nobel-winning physicist Richard Feynman has to say on the subject:

> I can appreciate the beauty of a flower. At the same time, I see much more about the flower than he [an artist friend] sees. I could imagine the cells in there, the complicated actions inside, which also have a beauty. I mean it's not just beauty at this dimension,

> at one centimeter; there's also beauty at smaller dimensions, the inner structure also the processes… All kinds of interesting questions which the science knowledge only adds to the excitement, the mystery, and the awe of a flower. It only adds. I don't understand how it subtracts. (00:00:59-00:1:51)

Feynman's sentiment (if not the scientific method itself) seems to have been shared by the Tamil poets of two millennia ago. What's more significant, they combine this scientific knowledge with their art form and thereby heighten the experience derived from reading it. Indeed, without their attentiveness to accuracy, the structural elements would remain mere embellishments.

If the poem itself stands to gain so much from biological references, then they hold deeper implications for the real-world referents themselves—natural-cultural elements that form the *karu* of the poem. The term itself means nucleus or essence—such is the place given to the landscape and its attributes. However, its place in the life of the poem and the people is not announced loudly. In being more than mere imagery or nature description, it also brings forth a value system that is not boisterous but instead quietly accepts nature as an inseparable participant of life.

On the face of it, this comes across as a case of utilitarianism, where nature is not noticed as an end in itself. While it may appear as if its significance extends only so far as its relevance for human life does, this is exactly what the *tinai* society stands opposed to. Utilitarianism presupposes a hierarchy: the human being is in an agential position and subordinate to him is his tool, nature. However, this sort of hierarchy was entirely rejected in the ancient society that Sangam poems emerged from. Aside from the dismantling of the nature-culture binary, other metaphysical categories also stand to be rendered irrelevant in Sangam poetry. Speaking about the early classical poems, Ramanujan says,

> The characteristic genius of this poetry is in its lack of metaphysical abstraction… Even the cosmology does not dwell on the first elements, origins, or the creator. Indeed no creator god is envisaged here, nor is Nature conceived as a whole or as a creative spirit. The gods and demons are part of the human and natural scene, immanent, worshipped or feared in certain places, trees, water, and stone. (PLW 287)

When a materially present continuum is favored over metaphysical categories such as creator-created, god-human, god-demon, etc., the very basis for hierarchization is removed. Evidence of this is available in the actual society of that period, glimpses of which are afforded

by the poetry itself. That the literature reflects the life of the time is evident, as argued by R. Radhakrishnan. Referring to the *Tolkappiyam*, the treatise on Tamil grammar, he says:

> This contextual grammar could be broadly characterized as a set of techniques of contextualizations to yield interpretations based on the very nature of the social, the cultural, the emotional, and the ecological settings of a people. So, we have in TOL [*Tolkappiyam*] a schematized account of the cultural geography and the geographical settings of the Tamils of the day. (15)

Thus, the lifestyle of the people of the day is a measure of the place of nature not only in their poetry but also in their society. This resonates with the hopes of Bill McKibben and others – that our ancient texts and traditions might give us clues as to how to live on better terms with nature. I now attempt to look beyond the poetry to understand the society that enabled its existence in the first place.

Tinai **and its implications in social life**

The connecting passage between the two is provided by *tinai*. This term has been introduced before as meaning 'landscape' with regard to the *mutal* of both *akam* and *puram* poetry. Extensive work done in this area by a scholar of ecocriticism, Nirmal Selvamony, has revealed four different meanings for the term, connecting the poem to the landscape to the lives of the people. He writes:

> The term tinai has four distinct, but interconnected meanings. They spring from the basic meaning, namely, 'to join'... Earth is tinai because it is an unbroken continuum out of the compacting of sand, rock, soil and other substances… By extension, tinai can also refer to any specific place on earth; especially, a house with its own land surrounding it, a homestead. By further semantic extension, tinai has come to mean 'family', particularly, family that occupies a specific place, and also family with kin members... when tinai refers to non-material firmness, then it means 'conduct'… ("Tinai Studies" par. 1)

In those times, *tinai* was an alternative social order where kinship relationships consisted of various elements connected both horizontally and vertically. This included the human and non-human, the natural and the cultural, the spiritual and the physical, bound together as intricately as family. What is known as the nuclear family according to Western sociologists today (a social unit consisting of a couple and their children) was not enough to

make up the *tinai* household. Present-day *tinai* studies would view the nuclear family as anthropocentric; an ecological family would consist of both inner and outer elements. Thus, while there did exist a nucleus consisting of a monogamous couple whose relationship was more "inner" than that between, for instance, the wife and her foster mother, this alone did not complete the family. Discussing the various inner dimensions of an ecological (*tinai*) family, Selvamony writes:

> In a family we could speak of the spousal, parental, and spiritual experience as constituting the inner dimension. The inner life of the heterosexual couple alone does not make the inner aspect of a family, for, such a thing exists even before the spouses are united by marriage. The couple's inner life is fulfilled not merely in their sexual relationship, but also in their parental role (the bond between the father and child and also between the mother and the child) and in their relationship to the ancestral spirits or family deity. ("Oikos as Family" par. 4)

Uniting these various entities together were love, duty, rights, and obligation. While love made horizontal relationships possible, vertical relationships were sustained on both freedom and responsibility. This is different from the one-dimensional hierarchization that came later, where man only exercised ownership over nature and was not bound to treat it as kin. The following *neytal* poem demonstrates the kinship relationship between human beings and nature:

> What Her Girl Friend Said
>
> *to him (on her behalf) when he came by daylight*
>
> Playing with friends one time
> we pressed a ripe seed
> into the white sand
> and forgot about it
> till it sprouted
>
> and when we nursed it tenderly
> pouring sweet milk with melted butter,
>
> Mother said,
> "It qualifies
> as a sister to you, and it's much better

than you,"
praising this laurel tree.

So
we're embarrassed
to laugh with you here

O man of the seashore
with glittering waters
where white conch shells,
their spirals turning right,
sound like the soft music
of bards at a feast.

Yet, if you wish,
there's plenty of shade
elsewhere.

Anon.
Narrinai 172 (PLW 33)

The sisterhood shared by the girl and the laurel tree is not merely figurative; so literally and practically is it perceived, that the girl suggests they find another tree under which to share a coy laugh because she is embarrassed to do it in the presence of her sister, the laurel tree. This indicates a relationship of authority, where the sister-tree seems to monitor the girl and is "much better" than her; and yet it also goes the other way, for it is the girl and her friend who planted and nurtured the tree as one would a child. This poem captures the very essence of a *tinai* society and its familial relationships, as discussed above.

Implications in ecological life

At the outset, it is necessary to mention that an ecological study is a modern one. Labels such as "ecological", "ecosystem", "biome" etc. began to be used systematically in *tinai* studies only in the eighties, explains Selvamony, who himself refuses to impose modern, "post-*tinai*" frameworks to interpret the concept of *tinai*.

That being said, the idea of living in close conformity with nature and forming cultures within the confines of the environment, can indeed be traced back to the *Tolkappiyam*. Just as

the Sangam poem begins with time and place, moves on to natural-cultural elements, and then arrives at particular human action, so did the Sangam society build itself on the landscape it occupied. Occupational activities are one example of this; rituals are another. Ritual and art/poetry were hardly distinguishable and were embedded in time and place like all other *tinai* activities. Kinship relationships, which occupied pride of place in integrative *tinai* societies, were affirmed in ritualistic practices. And since the human-nature relationship was as important as any other, rituals served to foreground this bond. Selvamony narrates how a fishing community at Chemmanceri whose ancestry can be traced back to the Sangam period, has managed to sustain itself along the *tinai* organisational structure to date. This was achieved through practical moves such as refusing to use a motorboat as it was incompatible with their philosophy of life and would destroy their environment. But it is interesting to note that the same level of perseverance is also seen in the perpetuation of their ritualistic songs. According to Selvamony:

> Even their *ampaa* songs are compatible with their economic operations. The songs revolve around just three of four notes in a highly repetitive manner so that they become part of their act of rowing the boat, and fishing. The minimal variations and repetition are necessary to maintain the focus not on the song itself but on other activities. It is virtually impossible to blend a *kiirttanai* (a type of classical music composition) with a fisherman's acts of rowing and fishing. It is for this reason that their songs have neither diversified nor become complex over the years. ("Tinai Studies" sec. 16)

Their song is guarded with the same dedication as their sea, which in turn is fundamental to their very life. Art, nature, culture, and the human, coexist thus, paying no heed to where one ends and the other begins.

Criticisms of landscape-based arguments

It has been spelt out in no subtle terms that land is the governing factor in the *tinai* society. Selvamony uses the terms "bioregions" and "culture areas" to identify landscapes that support the survival of specific peoples, dwellings, arts, occupations, flora, and fauna. This man-land relationship earns the favor of those who advocate the realignment of human divisions of the earth with biogeographical regions. This form of nativism encourages the formation of a biological identity for the human being rather than a political identity, for the former foregrounds the importance of pre-existing landforms rather than landscapes that are

distorted to suit manmade constructs. Consequently, several problems are attributed to an interruption in this biological/natural relationship:

> Poverty, crime, struggle for self-determination, social oppression and several other social maladies stem from either loss of land or improper land distribution or some form of fouled relationship with land... A reconsideration of tinai theory…and the tribal social order and worldview makes it clear that we, like all other organisms, are rooted in the land and our ailments are due to the straining of our relationship to the land… Therefore it is necessary that we examine the relationship between land and the social institutions so that we could reconfigure these institutions accordingly. ("Tinai Studies" sec. 15)

There is heavy criticism levied against such "back to a pristine past" policies. Aside from the obvious difficulty in returning to such a lifestyle after having moved so far away from it, such an outlook is deemed as a step towards nationalistic ideals. Bernhard Forchtner in his book *The Far Right and the Environment* hands out several such arguments against ecologism, beginning from a critique of anti-universalist thought, to a disapproval of anti-modernist thought that further engenders what he calls "cultural racism". This view is the polar opposite of the stance of Selvamony and other *tinai* scholars. Forchtner's censure is evident in his enumeration of such approaches under the banner of "far right". He writes that

> …the social is naturalised and essentialised…the *Nouvelle Droite* [New Right] suggests concern for the preservation of cultures in general, but also in relation to the natural environment in particular… Modernity, it is said, denies human nature while the *Nouvelle Droite* postulates the necessarily biological nature of our species… In this neo- or cultural racism…nature, landscape and soil are significant – though no longer simply in a sense of a biological connection between land and people…but in a symbolic way. (5)

He further defines such a nature as "nationalism's nature", terming it as "territorially specific…the homeland…the land where 'terrain and people have exerted mutual, and beneficial, influence over several generations'". Moreover,

> These are 'poetic spaces'…in which a people and its homeland become increasingly symbiotic… As such, the nation's landscape is more than sheer matter, it is symbolically charged, creating a link between past, present and future… and as

> communal being is projected onto sites, the latter are imputed with meaning and, as such, become a matter of identity. (4, 5)

Forchtner quotes Barcena et al. who argue that "nationalism and ecologism share a fundamental philosophical stance in their 'rejection of the leveling perversion of the universal and defense of the particular'", with the "rejection of so-called 'invasive species' both animals and plants", which in turn easily gets magnified into "perceived threat of foreign races and cultures to the native populations of their countries…" (5).

The parallels between what we have seen of *tinai* (and the very fact that it is encoded in poetry itself) and the situation being described here, are undeniable. However, I shall argue that while the shoe does fit, it need not necessarily be worn, because the implications of such particularised identities in a country like India are completely different.

Response to criticisms

As an instance of the link created between national identities and landscape, Forchtner cites the Dutch case where national identity "would indeed 'lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition…" (5). In the Indian context, a cultural identity rooted in landscape would not immediately translate into a monolithic national identity. *Tinai* communities are numerous, each cultural area giving rise to its tribes, and if anything, the recognition of this plurality would only make a case *against* a unified abstract national identity. Given that the point of reference in question is a 2000-year-old text, it is difficult to appropriate a society—or multiple societies—built on those lines to suit the idea of Indian nationalism today. On the contrary, it would put in perspective the lives of indigenous people and tribes, whose lifestyle continues to model what is proposed by *tinai*. It is these multiple marginal societies that the "back to the land" policy would transport us to, not the mainstream that lends itself to national identity. Thus, unlike in cases where an ecological or biological identity would automatically translate into a national one, *tinai*-based landscapes would forge stronger identities for cultural groups hitherto living on the sidelines.

Another argument made against the nostalgia for land is the lack of universality and the emphasis on the particular. There are two issues this mode of thought supposedly engenders: one, the essentialisation of the social, and two, an aversion to anything foreign (starting from plant species and arriving at races, ethnicities, religions, etc.). My concern here is not to question the validity of these arguments in general but to demonstrate specifically how they cannot be applied to a concept like *tinai*. The naturalization of an oppressive social order—for

instance, using genetics to justify racism—is a pressing problem. However, *tinai* itself boasts no such hierarchies. As has been established before, hierarchies based on absolute authority have no place in the *tinai* social structure; all relationships manifest both horizontally and vertically, held together based on familial attachments, responsibility, and freedom. The naturalization of such a system would in itself cause no harm; it would in fact normalize a mode of living that does not conform to the hierarchies of mainstream society.

The second problem (of the foreign versus the native) takes a peculiar shape in the Indian context. A.K. Ramanujan's essay "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?" charts out the nuances of Indian thought, and how context is quintessential to understanding it.

> Even space and time, the universal contexts, the Kantian imperatives, are in India not uniform and neutral, but have properties, varying specific densities, that affect those who dwell in them. The soil in a village, which produces crops for the people, affects their character… (51)

Further,

> As hour, month season, year, and aeon have their own properties as contexts, the arts that depend on time have to obey time's changing moods and properties… Like the Tamil poems, the genres and moods are associated with, placed in, hours of the day and times of the season. (52)

He attributes this "pervasive emphasis on context" to the basic framework of Hindu thought, with its concern with "*jati*". "Each *jati* or class", he writes, "defines a context, a structure of relevance, a rule of permissible combinations, a frame of reference, a meta-communication of what is and can be done". In this highly systematic arrangement of "the logic of classes, of genera and species" within which "human *jati*s are only an instance" (53), the rejection of non-native entities is not out of perverse hatred. Rather, it is simply the logical conclusion arrived at by a mode of thought that sets ample store by the importance of context. Moreover, the problem of "invasive species" is valid to date, with several instances of destruction (to the point of extinction) of endemic species caused by non-native species proliferating in an ecosystem where they have no natural predators. Environmental groups then undertake campaigns to eliminate the interlopers to protect native species and maintain the balance of that particular ecosystem. This is an obvious example of the centrality of context to understanding the natural world. In another land, these invasive species would be integral to the environmental fabric. Displaced, and ravaging a different landscape, they immediately

become dispensable. Evolutionary and biological science would back this up; a case in point is the malaria-driven extinction of Hawaiian birds by the sudden appearance of mosquitoes since the "birds didn't evolve with the pathogens that cause malaria" (Ebersole par. 5). This, then, is no longer a case of political affiliation, as has been indicated by Forchtner in his criticism of land-based ecology. It takes on an approach as scientific as the Sangam poets' appraisal of local flora and fauna; a point in favor of foregrounding landscape and its memory.

The leap from considering a species invasive, to targeting a section of human species as invasive, is not warranted—nor is it logical. *Tinai* only speaks of native human beings in terms of tribes and their occupations, deriving from the obvious effect that geographical terrain has on permissible human activities. In fact, migration from one landscape to another was not unheard of: "From hunting in the mountain region civilization moved to the stage of grazing in the grasslands (mullai) and from grazing it did to agriculture in the riverine plains" ("Tinai Studies" sec. 8). Human beings who translocated naturally adopted the lifestyle of the new place—hunting was not feasible in riverine plains, just as agriculture was impossible in the mountains. This is by no means invasive, for, according to National Geographic's definition of invasive species, "only when an alien species damages the surrounding ecosystem by crowding out other organisms and altering their habitat that it becomes invasive" (Nunez par. 2.) While it is true that human beings as a whole have proved themselves invasive to native flora and fauna since their evolution as a species, it is inapplicable in the case of race, ethnicity, religion, etc. The distortion of a valid argument by nationalist ideologies is problematic indeed, but it does not take away from the fact itself. Followed to its logical conclusion, the invasive species theory—based on *tinai*-like "back to the land" policies—ought not to end in divisive political identities, as alleged by Forchtner.

Conclusion

The viability of returning to a pristine past, considering how far we are from it, is questionable. But there is a call for moving forward with the "clues and suggestions" provided by texts and practices from the past. Sangam poetics do not suggest so much as embody values. The poems do not preach or speculate any form of religion, politics, or social norms. It must be remembered that the context from which we draw from them today is entirely different from that of their production. Rather than impose present-day frameworks upon a lifestyle of two millennia ago, it must be seen whether some of their methods can persist and respond to the problems of today. If nothing else, then their very attention to the materiality of not just nature,

but of human existence itself, can guide us towards a greater awareness of our own entanglement with the environment.

Notes:

[1.] See Amitav Ghosh's reading of Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* in *The Great Derangement* and Lynn White's influential 1967 paper, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis".

[2.] A similar classification can be made within *puram* poems but for the purpose of this paper I shall restrict myself to *akam* poetry only. There is also seen an overlap or correspondence between the divisions of the two genres—they sometimes share similar landscapes and native elements. However, the *puram* divisions are not set in stone or quite as distinct as those of the *akam*.

[3.] The Tolkappiyam mentions seven types of love, but the two that are left out (unrequited love and mismatched love) are looked down upon as "abnormal and undignified" (PLW 236) and are often cast into *puram* poetry. Since they do not fall into *akam* proper, they shall not be discussed in this paper.

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