

Kindness to Animals in Ancient Tamil Nadu

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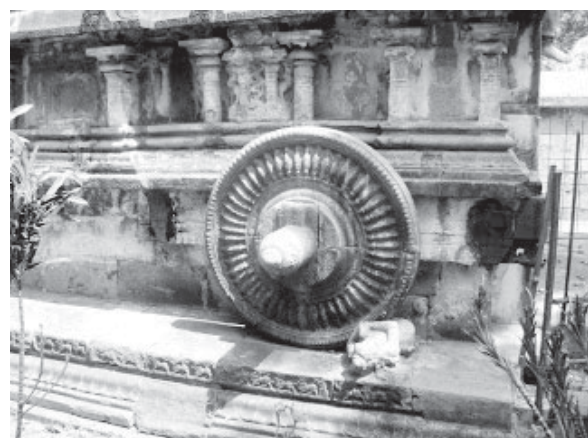
During the past couple of decades, the world has become increasingly aware of the harmful effects of industrialization and the consequent destruction of biodiversity. There has been a growing realization that we share this planet along with myriad forms of life and that we have no right to disturb the balance of nature. In ancient times, too, this awareness was prevalent. "How can one, who eats the flesh of others to swell his flesh, show compassion?" asked Tiruvalluvar in his *Tirukkural* (251). All the great religions of the world have extolled the virtue of non-violence and kindness towards animals. In our own country, the emperor Ashoka gave up eating meat after becoming a Buddhist. In more recent times, Mahatma Gandhi was a shining example of non-violence and the protection of the rights of the animals, especially the cow. Recent medical research has also proved that a vegetarian diet promotes longevity and health. In this connection, I have cited a few examples from Tamil literature.



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One day, Chibi - a Chola king - sat in the garden of his palace. Suddenly, a wounded dove fell on his lap. He handed over the dove to his servants and ordered them to give it proper treatment. A few minutes later, a hunter appeared on the scene searching for the dove which he had shot. He realized that the King was in possession of the dove. He requested the King to hand over the dove. But the king did not want to give up the dove. The hunter then told the King that the meat of the dove was his only food for that day. However, the King being compassionate wanted to save the life of the dove. He was also desirous of dissuading the hunter from his policy of hunting animals. Hence, he cut off a portion of his own flesh which was equal to the weight of the dove and gave it to the hunter. The hunter was abashed by this act of the king and regretted his violent actions. This story can be referred to in the *Cilappathikaaram*.

There is another story about a Chola King named Manuneethi Cholan. This king was



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famous for meting out justice. He had installed a bell in his palace. Any aggrieved party who wanted justice could ring this bell. The King would then hear the case and deliver justice. One day, it so happened that the King's only son, while riding a chariot, knocked down a calf, and the calf died. Seeing this, the mother cow went to the palace and rang the bell of justice. The King came out of the palace and was surprised to see an animal ringing the bell. However, such was the King's devotion to justice that he followed the animal to the spot where the calf had been killed. Grasping the situation, the King ordered that his own son should be run over by a chariot so that proper justice could be rendered¹.

This can be referred in *Cillappathikaram* as *Aavin kadaimani uhuneer nenjusudath than Arumperar puthalvanai aaliyin madithon* (20:54-55); *Manimegalai* (3:22); the king defends the whole world; and justice, when administered without defect, defends the king (*Thirukkural* -547); Heaven is the help of the helpless (*Palamoli* - 3). This incident is also referred to in the *Puranaanooru* (37, 39, 43, 46).

The *Thirukkural* (72) states that "Those who are destitute of love appropriate all they have to themselves; but those who possess love consider even their bones as belonging to others". This story also appears in the *Kamba Ramayanam* (65:7 & 7:355); *Kalingathupparani* (93); *Rajaraja Cholan Ulaa* (5-6); *Kulothunga Cholan Ulaa* (17); and *Vikirama Cholan Ulaa* (10-11).

In *Puranaanooru* (9), it is stated that whenever the warriors prepare themselves for battle, they have to make an announcement. The announcement is as follows: "Since the war is going to commence on such and such a day, cows, priests, animals, couples who have no issue, ladies, patients, and aged people are asked to go safe places".

In another legend, the Tamil Velir King named Vaiyaavik Kopperum Pekan was renowned as one of the seven great patrons and philanthropists. The great poet Paranar was a contemporary of this King. The poet has sung about the King Pekan. His poem speaks of an incident that occurred when the King was touring his country. The King saw a peacock shivering in the rain. Being compassionate, he immediately removed his gold laced silk robe and wrapped it around the peacock (*Puranaanooru*, 145 of Paranar). "With your elephants in rut, with your proud horses, with your fame that does not fade, Pekan, you who gave your cloak to the dark mindless peacock, because it was shivering in the cold" (The Four hundred songs of war and wisdom, p. 91).

Such was the rule of law in ancient times that Tamil poets like Silappadikaram, Kamban and Manikkavasagan have written about the time when the tiger would not attack the deer. Both the tiger and deer would even drink from the same lake, such was the harmony between them.

Over two thousand years ago, the great Tamil philosopher Thiruvallur said

*manuyir ombi arulalvarku illenba
tannuyir anjum vinai*

"The wise say that the evils which his soul would dread will never come upon the man who exercises kindness and protects the life of other creatures" (*Thirukkural*, 244).

*Kollan pulalai maruthaanaik kaikoopi
Ella uyirum thozhum*

"All creatures will join hands together and worship him who has never taken away life nor eaten flesh" (*Thirukkural*, 260).

*Onnaenatan unarndavai tunnamai
Vendum pirangan seyai*

“Let not man consent to do those things to another which he knows will cause sorrow” (*Thirukkural*, 316). (Those who have realised what is suffering must refrain from inflicting it on others). (*Thirukkural*, 32. 316).

And, as a warning,

*Noyellam noyseydar melvam noyseyyar
Noyinmai vendu pavar*

“Sorrow will come upon those who cause pain to others; therefore, those who desire to be free from sorrow should give no pain to others” (*Thirukkural*, 320)

Respecting this sentiment would certainly improve the lives of domestic animals and the chances of survival of India’s endangered wildlife. The Sangam Tamil poet Uruththirankannan also says that the parrots in Brahmins’ houses recite the Vedas. They repeat it because the Brahmins recite it every day (*Perumpanaatrupadai*: lines 300-301).

When three great Tamil kings laid siege to King Pari’s 300 towns, Kapilar trained the parrots to bring the grains into Pari’s territory. The poets Avvaiyar and Nakkirar were all praise for Kapilar for this help (*Akam* -303 and 78).

Narrinai gives the information about parrots calling a girl in affectionate terms even after she left home. The poem is about a girl who has eloped with her lover. The girl’s mother says that love is beautiful. However, when she sees her daughter’s friends playing with their toys, tears come to her eyes. The parrot also calls for the girl (*Narrinai* – 143).

Ainkurunooru (391), *Kurunthokai* (210) by Kakaipatiniyar: “Crows are attributed with the power of predicting arrival of guests.

If the crows caw, it is certain guests will come to the house. I attribute it to their strong sense of smell. When women make special dishes for guests, the good smell spreads and attracts the crows. They are intelligent enough to call their friends to share the food”. Crows are used as symbols for sharing in Tamil literature.

“Crows do not conceal their prey, but will call out to other crows to share the food. Wealth will be with those who show a similar disposition towards their relatives” (*Thirukkural*, 527).

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to highlight the ethical principle of justice and compassion towards animals from the background of Tamil literature and culture. This should help students of Tamil Nadu to develop kindness and justice to all animals on the basis of their culture and tradition.

In ancient days, many followed the principle: “*Pirapokkum Ella Uirkkum*” (all are born equal – encapsulates the Tamil ethos) and this manifested itself as acts of kindness and love. The generosity and kindness of the king is evident from this act.

The ancient Indians were renowned for their profound respect for other forms of creation. Unless we, in this modern age, restore this ancient virtue and realize our inherent harmony with nature and the biological diversity of creation, the animals will remain sacred in name only.

Reference.

1. Panchapakesh Ayyar, A.S., 1947, Kovalan and Kannaki: the story of the ‘Silappadikaram’ Re-told, p.128, The Alliance Company, Mylapore, Chennai.