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People of the Soil and the Music of the Earth: A Study on the Collective Unconscious Myths and Archetypes of the Tribal Folk Tales of Tamil Nadu

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Abstract:

The research paper strives to analyse the eternal unconscious myths and archetypes to be deduced from the folktales of Tamil Nadu. As an inevitable component of the literature of any language, folktales are the source of multiple information which might lead the readers to enter a new horizon of knowledge repository of the country. The folk tales of Tamil Nadu have been documented from the oratures of the ancient Tamil rustics. They represent the heartbeat of Tamil Nadu, as they generally have specific elements which are unified with facts and fantasy to expose the happenings of the ancient society to the younger generations through alluring songs tuned to music. The themes are universal in nature which is developed with some superfluous features to captivate the heart and soul of the humanity. Since the folktales have originated from the ancient forefathers of the humanity, obviously, they abound with magical realism, witchcraft, unreal and animal characters which tend to demonstrate various personified values of human life. The folktales communicate the universal themes related to virtue and vice. Along with the common themes, a nation's religious and philosophical outlooks also could be witnessed in them. The paper introduces the objectives of the study, analyses the folk tales – some are still oratures and some have been collected and recorded in the books by some scholars, specifies the findings and states the scope for future research.

Keywords: Tribal Communication, Nature, Culture & Tradition-bound themes, Ethical & Moral values of Life, Collective Unconscious, myths, recurring archetypes.



Folk tales are a part of the core myth of any country. They have gained wide popularity, regard and support among the people. Their origin dates back to the Stone age and even beyond that of the evolution of human beings on the earth. Probably, these folk tales could have acted as the medium of communication among the fellow human beings, at the earlier stage of life to formulate the fundamental rules of their society. The expressions of various emotions are available in the folklore, a corpus of songs available for all occasions of human life, which could be related to the innate instincts and reacts of man towards his life with Mother Nature. This notion being the initiative point of the research in this paper, it is to be studied that in the current scenario, the recurring myths and the archetypal characters of the folk tales have substantial influence upon the present social life. Hence, the study has become the focus of interest for many scholars now, which actually flagged the way to the perceptive notion of evolution of humanity since the ancient times.

India, being the land of strong and enriching heritage and tradition with significant history, is a reservoir of grand literature, various dance forms, painting and classical music. The country has prodigious past abundant with multilevel folk tales which could be connected with the core epics of the country. The nation's folktales stand as the emblem of grand narrative tradition of the forefathers and the cultural up-bringers that could be understood from the various expressive myths of Indian story-tellers and historians. Being a land of multiculturalism, the people of the country follow different customs and rituals, adopting polytheism and speak their mother tongue, a foreign language and a common language. Every State of the country has its own unique style of dance, music and architecture.

At present, India has 28 States across the land with the official languages numbering 28 and the number of non-official languages spoken by the tribal community and other minority groups might cross 1500. One of the most prominent Southern States is Tamil Nadu where the Tamil -speaking Dravidian ethnic group survives with their distinctive culture, tradition and literature. The name "Tamil Nadu" originated from the classical language Tamil which has a history dating back to many thousand years ago. A great corpus of Tamil literature has been created and preserved by the poets since the time of Sangam Age – approximately from the 3rd century BC to the 3rd century AD. Prodigious poets such as *Thiruvalluvar* whose *Thirukural* is the collection of 1330 couplets that touches upon the all-possible topics of the humanity just like the topics of the essays of Sir Francis Bacon.



There is a collection of five magnificent Tamil epics popularly known as *aimperumkāppiyāṅkaḷ* enrich the literary tradition of Tamil Nadu. *Silappatikāram*, *Manimekalai*, *Cīvaka Cintāmaṇi*, *Valayapathi* and *Kundalakesi* are those epics penned by the celebrated poets who followed Buddhism and Jainism. Tamil Literature has progressed towards the pinnacle of greatness through the acquiescence of multi-religious and complex philosophical creations of the scholars down the ages. Along with the rich literature by eminent writers, the Tamil tradition offers equal importance to the folklore and folktales of Tamil Nadu.

The South India's mythological themes predominate the folktales of Tamil Nadu which represents the traditions related to the Dravidian background, originating from the Tamil people. The corpus of mythology is an amalgamation of the elements from South Dravidian culture and the origin of civilization in the North India - Indus Valley culture, both got blended naturally with the religious beliefs of Hinduism. "Folk tales are not absolutely confined to a region and different versions of the same tales could be found in other regions. There is a sweet regional flavour in the folk tales which should not be allowed to die." (Seethalakshmi Preface)

Tamil folk culture revolves around the rural folk arts and crafts of the Tamil people that play a pivotal role in the lives of the rustics of Tamil Nadu and signify Tamil culture. Tamil people have songs for various occasions of their life, be it a sad or happy moment. Even while the farming tasks such as planting the paddy samplings or weeding the field, the womenfolk's chorus resonates the entire landscape. They are known as *naattupurapaattu* (meaning the songs of the rural region) and they encompass the joys and sorrows of the simple farmers. Festivals of these rustics, most obviously, integrate the rural dance forms which would resemble the tribal dances of ancient civilization. Most of the folk songs and tales of the Tamil community expose valuable facts related to the welfare of the humanity such as herbal medicine, proper food habits, moral and ethical values, the treasures of nature, the division of landscapes, supernaturalism, enchanting stories, proverbs, and the core mythology.

Folklores and folktales are an inevitable part of oral literature of the ancient civilization which have been passed on to generations through songs and music, initially and print in the contemporary days. Now they serve as a part of the core literature of the language concerned and play a strong role in shaping the tradition, cultural heritage and notions. A detailed study of the folklores would enlighten the readers to relate their roots better and to fix their status as the compassionate humans in the world. Since these folklores are oratures by nature, many have not



been documented properly. Yet, researches on them by many scholars have done considerable contribution to make the knowledge transfer from oral narratives to print and media.

Objective of the Study

The research paper endeavors to focus on the select folktales and folk lore tradition of Tamil Nadu and to derive the eternal unconscious myths and archetypes to be deduced from them. Folktales are the stories that sprung up from the people of the soil blended proportionately with music and songs. Even before paper printing, these songs and stories flew in the air as oral narratives and documented in the palmyra leaves. There were dramatic performances of the folklore in the streets and four corners by the wandering Tamil Bards carrying their own instruments such as simple portable drums and mini cymbals who had been surrounded by huge audience.

Tamil folklores and folk songs revolve around the sagas of either the royal personas or the gods and goddess of different landscapes. Each deity has His/ Her own favorite animal / weapon/ flowers and birds. In an implicit way, these folk tales are connected to the core myth of the Indian spirituality. These songs and tales of the oral singers has contributed significantly to the imparting of the core culture in the minds of audience unconsciously. They have to be considered as significant as the Sanskrit texts of the Vedic period.

Folk Tales- General themes

Folk tales across the world have some general features such as the use of magical realism, supernaturalism, presence of gods, goddesses, demi-gods, demons, angels, animal /bird characters, the personification of human and divine qualities – all intermingled with the creativity of the story-teller. Like the ballads in English tradition, the songs tend to narrate the stories of the incarnation of the Divine being as a human and the sufferings they endure in the earthly life. Evidently, all the stories have a moral ending, focusing upon the concept that virtue will be always rewarded and the vice will ever be punished. The key objective of these folk tales is to offer a moral and righteous guidance to the society so as to transport them unconsciously into the Utopian Landscape. Initially, folk tales were performed in front of the audience to entertain them. However, later, they are documented and passed on to many generations as the



moral guidance records. In this paper, some of the unconscious myths employed in the folk tales of Tamil Nadu and the recurrent images of the archetypal characters have been analyzed.

Range of Tamil Folktales:

The folktales of Tamil Nadu revolve around the stories from the great epics of India, the *Ramayana* & the *Mahabharata*, from the tribal community, collection of the beliefs of the Tamil society, consolidation of the art forms, proverbs, gender-related games, various professions and the five specific landscapes, as divided by the poets of the Sangam Age. Some of the following themes are worth mentioning:

1. The *ammanai* (mini balls game) song –probably the foremost folklore used in the epic *Silappatikāram* by *Ilango adikal*. The song is sung by a mini group of three women / girls who play the game of *ammanai*. It is a game where three girls sit and throw *ammanai* (small round weightless metal objects like tennis balls) to each other accompanied by songs. The beginner of the game sings a song which contains a general question and throws the small object (*ammanai*) to the other player. She catches the object while singing a poem in answer to the question raised by the first player. Though the game appears uncomplicated, there is an intellectually structure folk song is created in the form of interrogation. Later this game and song form developed into a game of bigger groups with more players. These songs were more popular in Tamil folk lores in which the songs were an inevitable element. In addition, these kinds of songs were meant only for women or girls.
2. The *Themmangu* songs – These songs are meant for any rustic who could create a song depending upon the situation like while walking alone in the rural farming fields, while driving a bullock cart, during field works such as planting saplings, watering the plants, weeding and collecting the produce. It follows flexible traditions such as solo-singing, interrogatory type between two people, chorus singing, exchanging communication between two people or a solo singer recites a poem and his/her groups repeat the lines in unison. The themes of these songs revolve around the simple objects of nature that they could view, while they are indulged in their day-to-day chores.
3. *Kummi* songs – These songs are accompanied with a circular dance by women or girls clapping their hands in patterned rhythmic way. The stories about the rural deities are the



common themes. The women of the farmers' family perform these dances as a mode to pray to the God of rain to shower His grace to the seeds sowed in the farming fields. It is believed by the rustics that these songs would bring prosperity to the entire community. As *kummi* songs are the songs of celebration, they are performed during the festivals and celebrations of the countryside by groups of women.

4. *kurati* songs – the gypsy women (known as *kurati*) of the *kurinji* (mountainous region) land of ancient Tamil literature used to wander around the land to do their act of fortune-telling” by reading the palmistry of upper-class women. They are endowed with the unique instinct to read the palms as well as the minds of the opponent. Their fortune-telling used to be in the form of a series of songs usually beginning with a prayer to the deity of the land. *Kutrala kuravanji* is such a book by Rasapaa Kavirayar with the collection of songs by *kurati*. The women were wiseacres enough to predict the future of the fellow beings.
5. *Oppari* songs (songs of lamentations) - One of the prominent genres of Tamil folk songs. Since music is intertwined in the lives of the rustics, *oppari* is sung to express the sorrow if a relative dies. The singers (most probably the women) imagine their existence in a fantasy land along with the dead where they used to do wonderful tasks together. Yet, now death has made them apart. While singing the songs in praise of the dead, their history is also implicitly revealed through *oppari*. These songs could be compared with the pastoral elegies of English literature. Usually, *urumi* (tabor) drum (a kind of hand drum causing sad murmuring sound) accompanies *oppari*.

Common Archetypes in Tamil Folk tales:

King Persona: These Tamil folk tales have the common major character as the king who rules their land. The popular kings of Tamil Nadu in the ancient times – the Chera, the Chola & the Pandya kings were the icons of the folk tales. Most of the tales and songs have been composed in praise of the valiant kings who were compassionate to the citizens.

Super Hero: The hero is the one who saves the people from crisis. In the folk tales of the rustics, the hero's glory is sung to glorify his gallantry, selflessness, wisdom and simplicity. During the colonial period, numerous folk songs were composed in praise of *Veerapandia*



kattapomman, the king of a tiny region in Tamil Nadu for his valor in opposing the British and his courage in facing his death by hanging.

Common deities: The deities of Hinduism – Lord Karthikeya, Lord Shiva, Vishnu, Goddess Parvati, Mahalakshmi and other rural deities appear recurringly in the folk tales. Their role is equivalent to the ones related to Super Hero. In some songs, the martyrs of the society is raised to the status of God and their songs of glory have been being recited by the rural folks.

Animals: In the Tamil folktales with moral themes, animals are the predominant characters and they represent many of the qualities of the human beings. They exchange their views about the various issues of the society and offer solutions to the crisis encountered by their fellow beings. Some animals and reptiles are the recurrent images of the tales, as they co-exist with the people of Tamil Nadu.

Landscapes: According to the ancient Tamil literature, the entire land of Tamil Nadu was considered to have been divided as five landscapes with imaginary boundaries. Since there are mountains, forests, pastoral lands, agricultural lands, coastal areas in Tamil Nadu, the poets divided the regions accordingly and named them as *Kurinji* (mountainous regions), *Mullai* (pastoral/ forest regions), *Marudam* (agricultural/farming lands), *Neydal* (coastal regions) and *Palai* (desert – not available in Tamil Nadu)). Based on these landscapes, the poets had creates a variety of archetypes related to each type.

The Collective Unconscious or Racial Memory

These recurring characters in the folk tales of Tamil Nadu could be the common features of the folk tales of other parts of the country too. The reason could be that any human civilization could have experienced the same kinds of emotions and experiences, more or less in the same type of setting. Hence, the archetypes and unconscious myths could have originated from the forefathers of human civilization who shared the imagination and creativity in common. That is known as Collective Unconscious. According to Carl Jung, “Collective unconscious” (Jung 46) refers to the “racial memory” of the entire humanity across the globe. Folktales are the expressions of such collective unconscious myths in a simplified way to reach the common man. The origin of the stories could be from the primitive myth of the mankind.



Findings of the Research paper:

Following are the findings of the research paper which could uncover some of the specific contribution of Tamil folklores to the entire civilization.

1. The primary objective of these folktales from Tamil Nadu is to entertain the readers by introducing an assorted variety of alluring animal and human characters. These characters form the personas which could be compared with the real-life human beings too. In some contexts, the tales are allegorical by nature so as to present some complex philosophies and political situations of the society, like the novel *Animal Farm* by George Orwell.
2. The primary objective of the tales is to preach the values of human life.
3. Mesmerizing unreal characters of the tales create a special interest in the readers.
4. Landscape plays a vital role in creating these tales. The Tamil poets of the Sangam age have contributed significant numbers of poems to describe the landscapes of Tamil Nadu.
5. Outstanding graphic qualities of the tales inspire the readers to visualize the life of the ancient society.
6. Features like magical realism, fantasy world and animal characters would arise great interest on the part of the audience or readers.

Scope of further Study

Cultural perception of a land is most viable through the analysis of the folktales of that region. The tales of the soil, either oral or written have some connectivity to the tales of an alien land too. With the study of folk tales as the base, further studies have to be initiated to document the corpus of the oral tales of the country. Comparative studies of the folk tales and the folk lores of the different States of India could be done for further research. Studies on the folk tales would always lend themselves for any further productive research in the fields of literature and anthropology. The lifestyle, beliefs, notions of the earlier civilization could be analyzed by doing in-depth research on the folktales.

In present society too, in many remote regions, tribal communities use folksongs as their major mode of communication. A study on the tribal songs and music compared with the contemporary songs and music could be an avenue for future study. A general study on the comparison of the folktales of various other lands across the globe and India could also be taken



as the field of research. Comparing the print medium of the folk tales with any other rendering of the same could be taken as a future study.

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