

Plants of some proverbs and phrases in Tamil

M.K. Vasudeva Rao

A-5/602, Acolade, Pune-411 014, Maharashtra, India (Formerly: Botanical Survey of India, Pune)

Corresponding author: mkvasudeva@gmail.com

Abstract

Plants have always been an integral part of human life in any civilization. Tamil language is rich in mentioning plants in proverbs and phrases to convey effectively their meaning. Some are exemplified with the proverb or phrase and connotation.

Key words: Plants, Proverbs, Phrases, Tamil

Introduction

It is well established and well known fact that the Tamil language and Tamil culture belong to a very ancient civilization. The language has enormous literature in form of epics, poetry and texts, at least 2000-3000 years old. The glorious period in the history of Tamil culture is “Sangam Period” that existed roughly from 600 B.C. to 200 A.D. It is in this golden period that the language and literature flourished extremely well and a large number of poets lived and contributed enormous literature which mostly exists even today. They reflect the cultural level and highly evolved life of Tamil people. The life closely associated with the environment, flora and fauna is clearly evinced in these literary works. A good number of plants, precisely flowers, known to the people of that time and used by them to convey the exact meaning effectively in phrases and proverbs of spoken language are known. One such attempt is “Plants in Tamil proverbial lore” (Amirthalingam, 1999).

“*Kurinji Pattu*”, rendering of Kapilar, an anthology in ‘*Pathu Pattu Noolgal*’, ten collections of idyllic poems, of Sangam period, lists 99 flowers known to people of that period. These flowers are identified and their botanical names are brought out. *Sic* https://karkanirka.org/2009/04/23/99_tamilflowers_1_10/.

“*Thirukkural*”, a treatise considered as verses of common code for universe, is a collection of 1330 couplets by Thiruvalluvar, written nearly 2000 years ago depicts the way of life, virtues and other mundane aspects that prevailed then. A few plants referred to in this epic poetry are ‘*தினை*’ - *Thinai* - foxtail millet [*Setaria italica* (L.) P. Beauv.] and ‘*பனை*’ - *Panai* - Palmyra (*Borassus flabellifer* L.)

mentioned as metaphors (in ‘*kurals*’ or verses 104, 144, 433, 1282) to signify the size. Surprisingly, only three flowers: (i) ‘*அனிச்சம்*’ - *anicham* - scarlet pimpernel - *Lysimachia arvensis* (L.) U. Manns & Anderb. (in *kurals* 90,1111,1114, 1120); ‘*தாமரை*’ - *Thamarai* – lotus - *Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn. (in *kurals* 617, 1013); (iii) *குவளை* - ‘*kuvalai*’ - water lily - *Nymphaea pubescens* Willd. (in kural 1014) are mentioned.

The environmental consciousness was of high order in that period. The land was classified into five categories, ‘*திணைகள்*’ - ‘*thinai*’ - *kurinji*, *mullai*, *marudham*, *neydahal*, *palai*. based on ecological nature and each was known to have exclusive flower and animal. The observations were as astute as can be seen in their war poems, comparing the situation where the fortress wall was protected by columns of warriors to that of the climber, ‘*உழிஞை*’ - ‘*uzhinae*’ - *Cassytha filiformis* L. growing abundantly and covering the large trees on which it grows. The language and environmental knowledge was superb as evident from different words for various stages of a flower, viz. ‘*arumbu*, *mottu*, *mugai*, *malar*, *blossom*, *vee*, *semmal*’ for young bud, bud, tender flower, open flower, blossom, drying flower and faded flower respectively (Anbarasu, M. & D. Udhaya Kumar. 2020).

A good number of Tamil proverbs and phrases related to plants are commonly used in day to day life. Some are given below.

1. “*வாழையடி வாழையாக வாழ்க*” - “*vazhaiyadi vazhaiyay vazhga*”: The phrase is said while greeting to emphasize the continuity of generations like that of banana (*Musa* spp.) that grow one after another by suckers and useful of all parts.



2. In the saying, “ஆலும்வேலும் பல்லுக்கு உறுதி” - “*Aalum velum pallukku urudhi naalum irandum sollukku urudhi?*” wherein it is conveyed that the roots of “*aal?*” *Ficus benghalensis* L. and “*vel?*” *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss. strengthen teeth.
3. The phrase, “உள்ளங்கை நெல்லிக்கனி போல” - “*Ullangai nellikkani pol?*” means, as the venation pattern of the fruit ‘*nellikkani?*’ -*Phyllanthus emblica* L. when held on palm is clearly visible, to imply that a matter is clear and no need to elaborate.
4. The saying ‘நீரளவே ஆகுமாம் ஆம்பல் குலத்தளவே ஆகுமாம் குணம்’ “*neer alave agumam ambal kulathalave agumam gunam?*”, that is the flower of ‘*ambal?*’ - *Nymphaea pubescens* Willd. will rise only to the level of water, to emphasize that the character will be of the kinship.
5. “அத்தி பூத்தாற்போல” - “*Atthi poothar pola....?*”. It will be like flowering of ‘*atthi?*’ - fig (*Ficus* spp.) If someone comes rarely. This phrase is used to denote rarity of event, since for a layman the syconium of *Ficus* is not collection of flowers but fruit.
6. “ஆலையில்லா ஊருக்கு இலுப்பைப்பூ சர்க்கரை” “*Aalaiyilla oorukku iluppapoo sakkarai?*” expresses that a place where no factory, ‘*iluppapoo?*’ - the flowers of *Madhuca longifolia* J.F. Macbr. are used for sweetening.
7. Another commonly used greeting phrase ---“ஆல் போல் தழைத்து அருகு போல் வேரோடி முங்கிற்போல் சுற்றம் முளுமையாய் சூழ வாழ்” “*Aalpol thazhaitthu arugupol verodi moongilpol sutram muzhumaiyay soozha vazhnbirupeer?*”- meaning, “May you flourish as an ‘*aalamaram?*’ -Banyan tree, (*Ficus bengalensis* L.), put forth prop roots and spread as the creeping stems of the ‘*arugampul?*’ -Bermuda grass [*Cynodon dactylon* (L.) Pers.], and prosper being encircled by kingsmen as thickly crowded ‘*moongil?*’ - Bamboo (*Bambusa bambos* (L.) Voss.)
8. “எட்டிப்பழுத்தால் என்ன ஈயாதார் வாழ்ந்தென்ன” - “*Etti pazhuthaal enna iyaadhaar vaazhndhaal enna?*”, meaning “What use the fruiting of the ‘*etti?*’ - poison nut tree (*Strychnos nux-vomica* L.) and to what use if the miser prospers.
9. “நெல்லுக்கு இறைத்த நீர் வாய்க்கால் வழியோடி புல்லுக்கும் ஆங்கே பொசியுமாம்” “*Nellukku eraitha neer vaykkal vazhi odi pullukcum ange posiyumam?*”, meaning if rice field is irrigated the water will reach also the grasses (species of Poaceae family).
10. “கடுகு சிறுத்தாலும் காரம் போகாது” - *Kadugu siruthalum karam pogadhu?*. The saying implies not underestimating a person by his stature like very small mustard [*Kadugu?* - mustard - *Brassica juncea* (L.) Czern.] seed will not lack its pungent nature.
11. “எள்ளுதான் எண்ணைக்கு காய்கிறது எலிப்புளுக்கை என்னத்துக்கு காய்கிறது” - *Elludhan ennaikku kaygiradhu elipuzhakkai ennathukku kaygiradhu?*, meaning seeds of ‘*ellu?*’ -sesame (*Sesamum indicum* L.) being dried for oil extraction but why shit of rat are drying. The saying is to convey that while workers do hard work but some pretend to work.
12. “*Kottikkilangu parikka chonnaal kobitthukkolvar pandaram, avitthu urittu munne vaitthaal amuthukolvaar pandaram?*”, meaning the plant ‘*kottikkizhangu?*’ - floating lace [*Aponogeton natans* (L.) Engl. & K. Krause], a medicinal aquatic plant is used in the proverb to tell some people shun work but reap the benefits only.
13. “இலவு காத்த கிளியைப் போல” - *Ilavu kaattha kili pola?*. The phrase is used to tell that a person waiting for long to reap benefit but fails like a parrot waiting for the fruit of ‘*ilavu?*’ - silk cotton tree (*Bombax ceiba* L.) to ripe for consuming but the fruit bursts and seeds fly away.
14. “கரும்பை விரும்ப விரும்ப வேம்பு” - *Karumbai virumba virumba vembu?*. To say anything in excess is not good by the metaphor: ‘*karumbu?*’ - sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum* L.), when liked too much it will also taste as ‘*vembu?*’ - neem (*Azadirachta indica* A. Juss.).
15. “ஆற்றில் கரைத்த புளி” - *Attril karatha puzhi?* is a phrase to denote anything goes waste as ‘*puzhi?*’ - Tamarind (*Tamarindus indica* L.) dissolved in river.
16. “தாமரை இலைமீது தண்ணீர்” - *Thamarai ilai meedhu thanneer?* a phrase used to emphasize that one should remain aloof as no water can remain on the leaf of ‘*thamarai?*’ - Lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn.).
17. “பத்தியத்துக்கு முருங்கைக்கீரை வாங்கிவா என்றால் பாலுக்கு அகத்திக்கீரைக் கொண்டு வருவான்” - *Pathiyathukku murungaikeerai vankiva enral, pal telikka avatthikkeerai konduvaruvan?*. The proverb is to state that any assignment should be given to one who can do it, but if an incapable person is asked to bring leaves of ‘*murungaikeerai?*’ - *Moringa oleifera* Lam. for treatment he will bring ‘*agathikkerrai?*’ - *Sesbania garandiflora* (L.) Poir. for funeral.
18. “ஈர வெங்காயத்துக்கு இருபத்தி நாலு புரை எடுக்கிறது” - *Eera venk aayathirku irupathinalu purai etukkiratu?*. This anecdote is to say that a worst critic will find numerous faults, as if taking 24 layers on wet ‘*vengayam?*’ - onion (*Allium cepa* L.).
19. “காய் காய்த்தால் கமுகு காய்க்கும்” - *Kai kaaythaal kamugu kaykcum?* - watering to be done extensively given for ‘*kamugu?*’ - (paakku) Areca nut (*Areca catechu* L.) for getting good yield, meaning need of enormous effort for achieving results.
20. “கடுகு போன இடம் ஆய்வர் பூசணிக்காய் போன இடம் தெரியாது”. Some have tendency to search for trivial things ignoring larger issues as one who searches for the place where mustard [*Brassica juncea* (L.) Czern. seed goes while not knowing where the pumpkin fruit [*Benicasa hispida* (Thunb.) Cong.]. disappeared.

Acknowledgements

I thank Dr. Anil K. Goel (formerly in CSIR-NBRI) for the encouragements. In all humility I dedicate this article in honour of late Dr. S.K. Jain, who was a source of inspiration and guidance in my career.

References

- Amirthalingam, M. 1999. Plants in Tamil proverbial lore. *Pulamai* **25**(2): 156-160.
- Anbarasu, M. & D. Udhaya Kumar. 2020. The phases of flowers in Sangam Tamil Literature. *Shambax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities* **8**(1): 218-220.