

Plant Creepers In The Ancient Tamil Love Poetry

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Introduction

Naturalism and romanticism are two distinct qualities of the age of *Caṅkam* literature (Varadarajan, 1957:2). The ancient Tamil poetry includes lines of a deeply philosophic nature. Tamil poets often revel in details more natural to scientific treatises on botany or biology. These ancient poets do not treat nature alone for its own sake but always resort to it to describe human life in its varying aspects, chiefly love and war. In short, they knit together the feelings of man and the beauties of nature.

A love of nature cannot but be engendered in people who often come in touch with nature. The influence in fostering and appreciation and love of nature is mutual between poets and people. The Tamil poets came from the people who as a nation were intimate with nature. The people were encouraged enthusiastically towards nature by what the poets wrote.

Ancient Tamil Love Poetry

Most of the poems in the *Akaṅṅūru*, *Narriṅai*, *Kuṅṅutokai*, *Aiṅkuṅṅūru* and *Kalittokai* teemed with the feelings and passions of men and women also depicted natural scenery. These anthologies deal with love esoteric called 'akam' and therefore it may be said that most of the poems on this theme depict passions of love along with pictures of nature.

The poems classified as 'akam' or dealing with love in *Caṅkam* literature constitute dramatic poetry, since they present objectively actions in words and through emotional experiences of the interlocutors, the hero, the heroine, the lady-companion and others. This emotional experience is called *uripporu!* (Tol. Porul, 4) (the conative aspect). The description of nature accompanying it serves as the stage for action in dramatic poetry and consists of two parts called *mutalporu!* (Ibid. 4) (the place and time) and *karupporu!* (Ibid. 18) (the objects of environment).

The regions are five, the *kuṅṅi* or the mountain region, the *mullai* or the forest or pastoral region, the *marutam* or the agricultural region, the *neytal* or the coastal region and the *pālai* or the arid desert tract (Ibid. 5). Each of these has its own peculiar flora, fauna and other aspects which are included under what has been referred to as *karupporu!*. The ancient poets found that in a particular season of the year and in a particular hour of the day, a particular region appears most beautiful and most influential that every landscape is seen best under the peculiar illumination of a season and a period of day when its influence is powerful on human impulses and activities. Thus are the different stages of love correlated to the different aspects of natural environment.

Creepers become climbers in order to reach sun-light and to expose a large surface of

their leaves to its action and to that of the air. To the Tamil poets of the *Caṅkam* collection, they served as suitable similes for the gentle and tender heroine (Aink.400). The *Narṛṇai* however, does not contain such a simile but mentions the creepers being entwined round the wrists as bracelets by the heroine (Nar. 60). There are nine different creepers that have been sung by the poets of the collection, mentioning in each of their poems, one or two details about them depending on the situation in which they are being described.

Atiral

The *atiral* or wild jasmine is a well-known genus of climbers and low bushes. It is very common in India where a number of them are cultivated in gardens (Bor, 1953:279). The *kuḷavi* and *mauval* also refer to the *atiral*.

The poet *Caṅkaṇṇaṇṇār* in *Narṛṇai* uses the word *mauval* to refer to this creeper. He says that this flower is found in mountain jungles (Nar. 122:3-4). Another poet *Mōci Kaṇṇattanār* says that it grows in high sandy areas along the sea-shore (Ibid. 124:5). This shows that it is common to most of the geographical districts. According to the poet *Palaiṇṇaiya Peruṅkaṭuṅkō*, the *atiral* blooms during the spring season (*mutirā vēṇil*), though a poem from the *Akāmanūṇṇu* describes that it blooms in the morning (Akam. 213:4). It is a creeper with fragrant flowers (Nar. 337:3-7) and the poet *Pālattanār* describes it as *mākkōṭi atiral* which could mean the dark, large or beautiful *atiral* creeper (Ibid. 52:1).

a cool chaplet of flowers
from the *kullai*, *kuḷavi* (wild jasmine),
kūtaḷam, water lily and
clearing-nut tree (*iēṇṇa*) (Ibid. 376:4-6)

This flower, perhaps because of its fragrance, is worn by both men and women, as we learn that the heroine also decks her tresses with the *atiral* blooms (Aink. 345; Akam. 393: Nar. 52).

Aṭumpu

The *aṭumpu* is a creeper which is commonly known as Here-leaf and sometimes as the Goat's foot creeper. It grows on the sandy river - banks and on the sea-shores within the tropics of both the hemispheres. It is a widely spreading creeper and its branches are herbaceous and often grow to about ten feet long. The *aṭumpu* creeper has numerous adventitious roots at the nodes from the creeping stems and is useful in binding the sand (Brandis, 1971:488).

There are poems in *Caṅkam* literature, describing the *aṭumpu* creeper. These creepers grow wild on the wet white sandy sea-shore (Patirrup. 51; Kurun. 248:3-5, 349:1-3; Akam. 160:3-4, 330:12-14; Kali. 132:16-17; Nar. 145:1-3, 254:2, 272:3, 349:2). The stem of the creeper is strong and its flowers are big (Nar. 145:1-3).

The month of January was the time of fasts to the ancient Tamils. Young girls wearing garlands and garments of leaves and flowers visited the local tanks or rivers and bathed in the chilly water to obtain the favour of marrying the men of their choice. The fasting women are also said to have plucked the *aṭumpu* creeper but what they did with these creepers is not known (Ibid. 272:2-3). The heroine and other maidens pluck these flowers to be mixed with other flowers and woven into chaplets worn in their hair.

A poem in *Akanṇūru* uses the epithet '*kavaṭṭu ilai*' (80:8) to describe the forked leaves of the *aṭumpu* while a *Kuṟuntokai* verse likens the leaves to the hooves of the deer and flowers are said to be bright in colour resembling small bells in shape (243:1-2).

In *Mīlaikīlār Nalvēṭṭanār*'s poem the hero who has helped his beloved to pluck flowers expresses his sorrow thus:

I helped them (the heroine and the maid)
to cull the *aṭumpu*, *tālai*
and *neytal* flowers in the backwaters.
I stayed with them all day long,
and helped them in all their needs.
Even then the maid
is not helpful to me (Nar. 349: 1-5).

Thus the *aṭumpu* flower seems attractive enough for girls to pluck them during their play. They also seem to have worn the flowers in their hair (Patirrup. 65) or as garlands (Kurun. 401:1-2).

Kāntal

The *kāntal* is the Malabar glory lily. It is a bulbous plant that flourishes in the rainy season. It is a very beautiful scrambler found wild in many parts of India but its beautiful flowers are an addition to any garden (Bor. 1953:338). Since it generally blooms in November, the month of rain, it is also called the "November blossom" (*kārtikaippū*). It has a slender stem which climbs by tendril-like prolongations of the narrow, generally lanceolate, leaves. The flowers which are borne in the upper leaf-axils are very beautiful with five thin, wavy and reflexed petals that stand upright. As a bud, the flower looks light green and then yellow. When newly in bloom the bottom half of the petals are yellow or orange while the top half is red. As days pass by, the petals fall to a horizontal position and the colour changes to scarlet and then to deep scarlet. In Malaysia, its lantern-like shape and flame like colour has won for it the local name of "Japanese Lantern".

The scarlet blossoms may be described in everyday language as being 'blood-red' in colour and thus the word '*kuruti*' (meaning 'red' or 'blood') has been used to describe these flowers.

this blood-red *kāntaḥ* flower (Kur. 1:4)
(*kurutiḥ pīvaḥ kulaikkantaḥ*)

the fragrant *kāntaḥ* like blood (Nar. 399:2, 34:2-4)
(*kuruti oppiḥ kamaḥ puṇ kāntaḥ*)

the bright red *kāntaḥ* (Nar. 176:6, 173:2)
(*oṅcaḥ kāntaḥ*)

The *Narṅṅai* poets describe the *kāntaḥ* as one of the most scented flowers of the hilly tracts. A maiden claims that the heroine's home on the delightful hill slope is diffused with the scent from the blooming bunch of *kāntaḥ* flowers (Nar. 313:6-7). A poem shows a little girl who, having been robbed by a monkey of her vessel of milk, beats her hands against her body. This reddened her tender fingers and made them look like the petals of a full-bloomed *kāntaḥ* that grows on the Potiyil hill (Ibid. 379:12-13).

Poets also use as comparison the red *kāntaḥ* to the face of the elephant and to the tusks of the elephant stained with blood while fighting with a tiger.

Where many bright-red *kāntaḥ* flowers
lie on a bolder in the village square,
making it look like an elephant
speared in war with wounds on its face (Kur. 284:1-3)

The bright red *kāntaḥ* like the lines
on the faces of an elephant, in a row (Nar. 176:5-6).

The poet *Kapilar* mentions the pollen of the *kāntaḥ*. It is stated that a cow grazing on the slopes gets itself besmeared with the pollen of the *kāntaḥ* blooms on the way so that its own calf is unable to recognise and looks bewildered at it (Ibid. 359:1-3).

The *kāntaḥ* is also called *tōṅṅi* (Kur. 107, Mullaip. 86) or *ceṅkāntaḥ* and *kōḥal* or *veṅkāntaḥ*. *Tōṅṅi* is red in colour but *kōḥal* (Kali. 101, Kur. 62) is white in colour. The poet *Cēkampiṭṭāṅṅar* in *Narṅṅai* while describing the events that occur at sunset mentions that in the thickets the *tōṅṅi* holds up its flowers as lamps lit by nature.

palvayin *tōṅṅi tōṅṅuru* putalviḥak kurūa (Nar. 69:6).

The poet *Ilavēṅṅāṅṅar* also depicts the beauty of the red ground of the pastoral region. The fresh showers have made it attractive and the sapphire-like *karuṅṅai* flowers, the bright *tōṅṅi* flowers in the thickets and the gold-like blossoms hanging in bunches on the *koṅṅai* branches are all said to adorn the region (Ibid.221).

The poet *Ilantiraiyaṅṅar* says that the *kōḥal* flower blooms in the rainy season.

the clouds,
forgetting the proper season,
have drunk the water of the sea;
being pregnant and unable
any more to contain the water,
have poured it (as rain).
Being foolish and imaging it
to be the season of heavy rain,
the ignorant *piṭavu* shrubs,
the *koṅṛai* and *koṭai* plants
have flowered (Ibid. 99:5-10)

Karuviḷai

The *karuviḷai* or mussel-shell creeper is climbing pea with stems as long as long as fifteen feet. The name *kākkamam* also refers to the *karuviḷai*. The poet *Peruntalaiccātṭamar* in *Naṛṛinai* depicts the *karuviḷai* flowers as eyes and resembling the spots on the peacock's tail. He says,

At midnight
when all are asleep and
there is rain,
the north wind. (*vāṭai*) blows;
the eye-like *karuviḷai* flowers
wave looking like the spots
on the peacock's tail (Nar. 262:1-3)

In this poem, he has successfully used two similes together for the same flower which are used separately in the *Kuṛuntokai* and the *Akaṇṭṭūru*. In the former, the *karuviḷai* flowers are described resembling the spots on the peacock's tail (Kuru. 110:4) and in the latter the poet says that the flower blooms like the eyes with drops of tears (Akam. 294:5).

Motion and form as well as colour of the natural objects have attracted the eyes of the poet *Ḥavēṭṭaṅṅār* in *Naṛṛinai*. The red ground of the pastoral region is beautifully pictured. The fresh showers have made it attractive and the blue, sapphire-like *karuviḷai* flowers, the bright *ṭōṅṛi* flowers in the thickets and the gold-like blossoms hanging in bunches from the *koṅṛai* branches are all said to adorn the region (Nar. 221:1-4).

The author of the *Kuṛṅcippāṭṭu* also uses the epithet '*maṅṅippīṅ karuviḷai*' to describe the sapphire-like *karuviḷai* flower (68). The above poets describing the *karuviḷai* flowers resembling eyes and the spots on the peacock's tail and the blue sapphire, suggest clearly that the flower is blue in colour.

Kurukkatti

The *kurukkatti* is the common delight of the woods. It is a large, straggling, climbing shrub. It is also known as the *mātavi*. Its stem is considerable size. The bark is brown in colour, thin and exfoliating in small thin flake. The wood is reddish-brown in colour and very rough with darker patches in the centre (Gamble, 1972: 118).

The species of the genus *hptage* are natives of tropical Asia and considering its place in Indian mythology, the plant seems to have a very long association with this country.

This is not so much of a shrub as a straggling climber: given proper care however, it can be grown in either form quite successfully. The main point about this plant is its enormous size, the leaves growing about fifteen centimeters long. The white and gold flowers, grouped in terminal and auxiliary inflorescences, however are relatively smaller. The dark-green leaves are smooth in texture and arranged opposite each in pairs giving a dense appearance to the plant. The asymmetrically formed flowers, having one of the anthers and one of the petals differing very much in size from the others are very fragrant and make up in this way for their lack of size (Pal & Krishnamurthi, 1967:56).

The *kurukkatti* flower can be found in the *mullai* region. It blooms during the rainy (*kār*) season.

The farmer's tender maiden,
has her basket full of the cool petals
of the *kurukkatti* and *pittikai* flowers.
The bees hum around her basket.
She cries,
"Won't you buy my flowers"? (Nar. 97:6-9).

According to the poet *Nalvalutiyar* in the *Parip̄ṭal*, the fragrant *kurukkatti* flowers bloom on the bank of the *vaiyai* river (Pari. 12-79). Thus this plant needs plenty of water to grow. Therefore, it is mentioned as blooming in the *kūtir* season which is also a season of rain. The long poem *Perump̄n̄ārruppatai* uses the word *kuruku* to refer to the *kurukkatti*. This poem describes the long *kurukkatti* creeper with fresh leaves and flowers with streaks (Perumpan. 375-376).

Kūtaḷam

The *kūtaḷam* is a large genus of which only a few are of shrubby size but many are creepers. The most noticeable of these is said to be the "moonflower". The *kūtaḷam* is a creeper and its flowers are white and sweet-scented. They open only at night and are conspicuous in hedges and ravines in the early morning in many parts of India (Gamble, 1972:507).

The *kūtaḷam* leaves are usually alternate. The petals very rarely overlap and are twisted in the bud. The anthers are normal.

The flowers are also called *kūtaḷi* or *kūtaḷam* (Kur. 282:6) or *tāḷikkoṭi*. The poet *Tānkāl Poṅkollan Veṅṅūkaṅṅār* in *Nar̄ṅṅai* says that the *kūtaḷam* flowers bloom on the mountain slopes and are fragrant (313:3-8).

Another poet by the name of *Kūrṛaikumarayār* also describes that the *kūtaḷam* flowers bloom on the mountain slopes but he adds that the flowers bloom during the rainy season (*kūtir*) with sweet fragrance. They bloom in bunches and they attract the bees that sing around them (Ibid. 244:1-2).

The *Akanāyūru* and *Kuruntokai* poems clearly describe it as white. The poet *Paranar* in *Narṛinai* uses the epithet '*kurunūḷ kūtaḷi*' to explain the short stem of the *kūtaḷam* (60:1). According to the poet *Auvaiyār*, the *kūtaḷam* flowers are white in colour. She says that the garland of white *kūtaḷam* flowers thrown high in the sky looks like the flock of white cranes flying in their characteristic arch-like arrangement (Akam. 273:2-3).

Miḷaku

Miḷaku is a creeper commonly known as pepper vine. It is a climber which is found wild in the forests of the Circars, doubtfully indigenous in those of Assam and Malabar and is cultivated in the hot damp localities of Southern India.

Caṅkam poems use the word *kaṛi* to refer to the pepper creeper. We learn that the pepper creeper grows in mountain areas. The following epithets explain that the pepper creeper is found on the mountains.

the pepper creeper
in the cloudy mountain (Pari. 16:2)
(*maiṇṇu cilampir kaṛi*)

the mountain where
the pepper creeper grows, (Aink. 243:1; Akam 2:6; Kali. 52:17)
(*kaṛivaḷar cilampu*)

the mountain range
where the pepper creeper grows (Kurun. 90:2; Puram. 168:2)
(*kaṛivaḷar aṭukkam*)

The poet *Maturai Aḷakkaṇṇāḷar Maḷayār Maḷḷayār* in *Narṛinai* who has mentioned the pepper creeper says that it grows in mountain areas. He describes the wild fowl which satiated with the buds about to bloom sleeping in a place where the pepper creepers grow in abundance and are therefore entangled with each other (Nar. 297:7-8).

Mullai

The *mullai* or *mauval* is known as the Arabian Jasmine. It grows in the pastoral region which is known in classical Tamil poetry by the name of the plant itself. It is a dark-leaved climbing plant with small white fragrant flowers blooming in clusters. Though wild, it is also cultivated for its flowers which are largely used by Hindus to make garlands, being especially sacred to Vishnu.

The *mullai* flowers blossom in the rainy season (*kār*), as shown by the following poem by *Kācipaṇi Kīraṇār*.

The season of his return is *kār*
with heavy showers
when the small tender flowers
of the *mullai* bloom,
spreading fragrance and honey
so that the cool bower is beautiful
like the spotted and
lined face of elephant (Nar. 248:1-4).

This picture is most appropriate as the small - stemmed *mullai* creeper yields only buds in the beginning of *kār* season, in the evening when the sun sets behind the mountains.

The sun, its rage exhausted,
reaches its mountain.
A flock of sparrows,
their wings spread wide,
passes through the sky,
the day, bit by bit, is spent
and *mullai* opens its bud-mouth (Nar. 369: 1-4).

With the descriptions of colour and form, the poet *Maturaip Peralavayar* also refers to the fragrance of the *mullai* flowers (Ibid. 361:1). Because of its pure white colour and fragrance, the *mullai* bloom was held in esteem as a symbol of chastity by ancient Tamil people. Thus wives are said to wear the jasmine (*mullai*) flowers as a sign of chastity. In poetry they become meaningful similes like.

The young maiden with chastity as
perfect as the *mullai* (Ibid. 142: 10-11)
(*mullai cāṇṇa kaṇṇi*
melliyar kuṇṇamakal)

These creepers were usually grown near the *nocci* trees that were planted as fence so that the creepers climbed on the tree and there was no need to put up other support (Ibid. 115:5-6).

The poet *Viḷḷkaṭṭaiṭṭai Perinḷaṇṇaṇṇār* uses the word *taḷavam* to refer to the *mullai*. He describes that the *mullai* creeper blooms in the thicket. He says,

The buds of the leafless *pūavu*
unfold into tender flowers;
the *taḷavam* creeper blooms
in the thicket;

the *konṛai* blooms like gold;
the many-flowered *kāyā* bough
shines like sapphire;
and the season of showers
began this morning;
let your chariot travel
with great speed,
O Charioteer! (Ibid. 242:1-6).

There is also a description of the *mullai* creeper spreading on the *kallī* tree.

The *mullai* spreads on the *kallī*
which grows in the pebbly *pālai* tracts,
with a head resembling the king-fisher.
The shepherd who drives to pasture
herds of sheep with shaking heads,
plucks with strong hands during the nights
the sweet smelling *mullai* flowers
and strings them along with
the white young leaves of the palmyra;
these garlands spread
perfume along the streets,
of my village
which are decorated by them (Ibid. 169:4-10)

There is a simile which compares the *mullai* buds to the teeth of the heroine (Kur. 186:3-4). The hero is depicted as consoling his sweetheart before departure by promising to return when the *mullai* yields buds like her teeth adorning her charming face (Ibid. 108:7, 316:4, 370:10).

Pakanrai

Pakanrai is a small creeper. It is also called *civatai*. The *pakanrai* flowers are white in colour and they look like the *tumpai* flowers which are symbolic of one of the aspects of war in ancient Tamil country.

Ascending to altitudes of 3000 feet it is found throughout India, Sri Lanka, South-East Asia including Malaysia, Australia etc. It is occasionally cultivated in gardens as an ornamental plant. The roots and bark occur in cylindrical pieces and vary in length from two to four inches. The thickness varies from one quarter to one inch. It is quilled or curved and smooth, but often wrinkled longitudinally.

The poet *Nakkāraṇār* in the anthology of *Narṛṇai* describes the *pakanrai* flowers blooming during the season of severe dew (*kaṭumpāṇi arciram*).

in the season of early dew
 when the *pakāṅrai* blooms (86:3-4)
 (...*pakāṅrai malaruṅ*
kaṭumpāṅi arṅiram)

Here, *arṅiram* is the dew season, which is described as one in which the clouds pass on to the south and by pouring rain make the mountains green with shrubs and creepers growing luxuriantly.

The poet *Kalārk Kīraṅ Eyiṅriyūr* in the anthology of *Akaṅṅuru* describes that the *pakāṅrai* blooms white flowers in green bunches (217:6-7).

The flower being white in colour, is compared by poets to many objects of that colour like the pale moon (Aink. 456:2), the remainder of a conch after cutting bangles out of it (Akam. 24:2-3), a white drinking vessel (Kali. 73:1-4) and cloth (Kur. 330:3-4).

Pīr

Pīr or *pīrkam* is a sponge gourd creeper. The *pīr* creeper is small and green in colour which grows on the fences around the house.

People plant this *pīr* creeper because of its fruits. It is edible and is used to cook a vegetable dish. A *Kuruntokai* poem says that the *pīr* flower blooms in the rainy season (98:5). The *pīr* creeper has fragrant flowers which can attract bees and it yields honey.

The poet *Tumpicērkiṅār* in the *Narṅinai*, compares the pale complexion of the heroine with the colour of the yellow *pīr* flowers. Her complexion becomes pale with pining in separation and she asks the bee why it is not attracted by the paleness of her complexion just like the *pīr* blooms of the same colour but lacks fragrance.

“O cruel bee!
 you suck honey from the *pīr* flower
 which spreads on the sharp thorn fence
 that guards the house.
 But,
 you do not hum,
 for my scentless complexion”
 (though of the same colour) (277:5-8)

Vallik Koṭi

The four-leaved yam creeper or the *vallik koṭi* is also found in the hilly areas (Ibid. 295:1). It is cultivated in many parts of India. The tubers are eaten, cooked as a common article of diet. There are many varieties differing in shape and colour. They grow fast because the duration is only from seven weeks to two months. It is also used externally in the form of powder for ulcers.

The *vallik koṭi* yields yams which form an important item of food for the hill tribes. The *kuṅava* maid *valli* whom *Murukan* is said to have married was definitely named after this *vallik koṭi*.

The poet *Auvaiyār* in the *Narṛṇai* describes that the *vallik koṭi* grows on the hill slopes but mentions it as a simile in a neytal poem. She compares it to the friends who are sad,

the withered *vallik koṭi*
on the mountain slope (295:1)
(*murinta cilampiṇ arinta valli*)

Vayalaik koṭi

Vayalaik koṭi is a small green creeper considerably larger in all its parts stems, branches and leaves. Hairs surround the joints and the insertion of the leaves and flowers.

It is not considered edible because it is very unwholesome and apt to produce stupefaction. The flowers blossom at or before noon and remain open till near sun-set. This is another special feature of this creeper. The poet *Ōraṃpōkiyār* in the anthology of *Añkuruṇūru* says that the *vayalaik koṭi* is red in colour and that people made garlands with this creeper (52:1).

A poem in the anthology of *Narṛṇai* describes the heroine planting a *vayalaik koṭi* and watering it daily. Her affection for the creeper is great. One day a cow eats it up and she discarding her ball and doll cries very much for the plant that she had grown herself (179:1-3). This poem suggests that the creeper grew naturally and was not planted by her. It is possible that it is a creeper of the mountain region.

In a poem by *Kayamaṇār*, a heroine who took great care of the *vayalaik koṭi* leaves her mansion with her lover. The mother looks with fond regret at the places she frequented. She gazes with sorrow on the *vayalaik koṭi*, which the heroine planted with her own hands and watered daily but has withered now for want of its young gardener (305).

Usually this creeper is mentioned when the heroine elopes with the hero and the mother or the foster-mother bewails her separation. Like the balls and dolls the heroine used to play with, the *vayalaik koṭi* she cared for also reminds the mother of her daughter who had gone away.

Conclusion

In *Cankam* literature, the descriptions of creepers are frequently blended with human emotions. The ancient poets in this literature give us not only the beauty of nature that was experienced by them; they not only give their experience itself, transplant it from their mind on to ours through the medium of words; they have communicated both the matter and the manner of their experience in nature. That is why their descriptions seem to be almost objects instead of words. Even the epithets in those descriptions imply a kind of personal life underlying nature. They are indeed the natural expressions of the sensitive hearts and observant minds alert to the impressions of nature (Varadarajan, 1957:399). The ancient poets have observed the phenomena of external nature with an insight into human feelings as either influenced or affected by them.

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