

Ecological Wisdom and Alter/Native Discourse(s):

Some Aspects of Spatio-temporal Awareness in Ancient Indian Culture with special reference to South India

by S. MURALI

*Kattathu kaimannalavu,
kallathathu ulahalavu—Auvayyar*

1. Introductory

The ways of living and ways of thinking of a people, their environment, history and mode of relating to each other and the world at large — the unified field of living experience — broadly informs their culture. Any approach toward the understanding of culture thus would of necessity call for a holistic approach.

The idea that education is one of the most significant and dominant processes through which the culture of a people is consciously passed down to the next generation may not be a debatable point; however, the manner and method in which it is implemented and practiced as well as the other factors — the political, the socio-cultural etc. — that determine its operation, would necessarily call for a closer inquiry. The ideological underpinnings of the educational machinery have been brought into the focus of our attention by the culture-critics as well as Marxist theoreticians over the years. One cannot approach the educational system of a people and their culture in any naive and easygoing manner; both processes are indeed complex and multifaceted. More so in a culture that had suffered heavily under colonial depredation—its systems and values are clogged over for countless years and its narrative continuity marred and disrupted. I would like to raise the question of the educational system in India as at present and its dialogical possibilities with our culture. I

am quite aware of the inordinate nature of taking up such an issue for analysis within the purview of a single paper and hence do not venture to do so either. However, I shall only pause to highlight the interrelationship of education and culture and point out that there does exist a monstrous divide in the present-day educational system and our culture. The question that looms large before us all is whether we are at all relating in any significant manner—let alone the self reflexive process of entering into any dialogue—to any aspect of our *culture* through our educational establishment? The image of the Upanishadic *Rishi* sitting alongside his disciples in a combined search for the proverbial Truth/Wisdom would sound discrepant in the present day scheme of things. Life has changed, times have changed and perhaps, so too have values. No educational system is good if it forgoes its very existential criterion—imparting freedom—ideological and otherwise. Every educational system needs to have healthy links with the culture of the people. Culture and education are thus two sides of the same paper. Tear one, you tear the other.

I believe that wisdom that informs the highest levels of knowledge cannot simply be imparted through the present day systems of education. It can be acquired willingly and through a struggle that calls for a paradigm shift in perception, a sort of Nietzschean *transvaluation of all values*.

Friedhelm Hardy, the renowned culture critic notes with controlled sarcasm in his *The Religious Culture of India: Power, Love and Wisdom*:

We live in the age of the computer... where creativity is made available to us of such a totally different and superior kind that anything that the ancient cultures of the world have to offer dwindles to insignificance... Look at how completely new worlds have opened up—the culmination of a scientific culture! (p. 4)

This is the dominant tone of critical attitude to any enterprise that calls for a closer look at non-scientific or supra-scientific values. What is generally felt to be of any significance should be answerable to/by/through science and its counterpart, technology. Our ideas of development and progress are totally controlled and manipulated by this sort of *scientism*—the surviving residue of post-Enlightenment logic and rationality. It is not that I am taking issues with science as such (and calling attention once again to that great divide—the idea of two culture) but only that I do not want to have any truck with those that swear blindly by excessive science! Science is good and necessary but not *scientism*—it is nothing but intellectual slavery.

The same technology that produced a vast network of interlinking communicative systems and made space travel possible also gave rise to Chernobyl and Bhopal. It is not science that is answerable but the hands that wield the produce of science. An excessive faith in science and ordered progression has led the world to the brink of a series of nuclear/chemical catastrophies. The crisis that looms large before the developed as well as developing countries today is one that is

multidimensional and alarming. As early as 1984 E.F. Schumacher warned us in his epoch making book, *Small is Beautiful*:

At present there can be little doubt that the whole of mankind is in mortal danger, not because we are short of scientific and technological knowhow, but because we tend to use it destructively, without wisdom. More education can help us only if it produces more wisdom. (p. 66)

For Schumacher education should lead towards wisdom because the very essence of education is the transmission of values, not more and more information.

Fritjof Capra in *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture* (1982) noted:

Our progress . . . has been largely a rational and intellectual affair, and this one-sided evolution has now reached a highly alarming stage, a situation so paradoxical that it borders on insanity. We can control the soft landings of spacecraft on distant planets, but we are unable to control the polluting fumes emanating from our cars and factories. We propose Utopian communities in gigantic space colonies, but cannot manage our cities. (p. 26)

These warning notes appear to have fallen on deaf ears. In the midst of a maddening consumerist culture where everything and everyone is commodified, we are blind to the direction of our lives. The illusion of unlimited powers unleashed by technology and science has made us confuse price with value. To believe Schumacher:

The arising of this error, so egregious and so firmly rooted, is closely connected with the philosophical, not to say religious changes during the last three or four centuries in man's attitude to nature. I should perhaps say: western man's attitude to nature, but since the whole world is now in a process of westernization, the more generalized statement appears to be justified. *Modern man does not experience himself as part of nature but as an outside*

force destined to dominate and conquer it. He even talks of a battle with nature, forgetting that, if he won the battle, he would find himself on the losing side. (pp. 10-11) [my emphasis]

Science, culture, education and ecology—these are interrelated issues in the present, and this is the context in which my paper takes shape.

2. Ecology

Ecology is again the *scientific* study of the interrelations between the living and non-living things, between life and environment built no doubt upon the consciousness and conscience of the post-industrial culture. As Marta Vannucci, a Biologist specialised in tropical mangroves and ecology, points out in her insightful book, *Ecological Readings in the Veda: Matter, Energy, Life* (1994),

The interrelations among individuals and of species among themselves and with their environment are the core of ecological studies; hence the best definition of ecology is "the study of the distribution and abundance of species and individuals." (pp. 88-9)

Ecology has surfaced as the emergent scientific consciousness of an intimate and interlinked *multiverse* vis-a-vis universe of life and living—a nascent science that endeavours towards a holistic perspective. As a discipline, Ecology is a comparatively recent development in the West. But *ecological wisdom* is as old as the oldest religious traditions in the world. Sociologists opine that all religious traditions were essentially cosmic with a *holistic concern for nature and life* but as they became organized institutions with the support of political and economic powers and with their coming in to contact with certain philosophical traditions, they became metacosmic and began to introduce new value systems which in a very strong way undergrid some of the present political, social and economic structures.

Poetry and art had always evinced deeper links with nature. No poet or artist needed to be "ecologically self-conscious"

to experience unity with nature in a biological-aesthetic bond. The process was spontaneous and natural—by virtue of their experiential mode both poetry and art necessitated and mediated a link with all life. However, a poetics of nature, or *Eco-Poetics*, is a recent phenomena in the academic curricula of US universities. Eco-Poetics belongs to the order of Green Politics. After the massive overdominance of Deconstructive criticism today many Universities are turning green. The prime function of eco criticism is to isolate that deeper commitment to nature and living, literature and the arts have celebrated. In fact it is its function to rediscover that aspect of celebration itself which has been clearly submerged under a hardened insensitivity to nature fostered and nurtured by the aftermath of European Renaissance and Enlightenment that cultivated an idea of nature as the 'other' to be encountered, overpowered and tamed into subjugation.

3. South Indian Culture and Ecological Wisdom

An oft quoted mantra in the *Veda* goes like this:

apah shanthi, antariksham shanthi, dyau shanthi, prithwi shathi, aushadiyam shanthi, vanaspathiyam shanthi, visvedevaya shanthi, brahmane shanthi, sarvam shanthi shanthi.

This might be read as the mere product of a collective pastoral mind coming to terms with a slowly recognizable physical reality. However, herein we see the fundamental utterances of man-nature relationship. And such cosmic religiosity has now disappeared and thinned out over the years and now lies buried under the wreckage of the passion for technological development. Technology as it has come to be slowly recognized is the product of the over-reaching masculine or the *yang* qualities of the human being, while the feminine qualities of acceptance and acquiescence – *yin* – have been submerged in the blind marching of man-centred history. The race for conquest has put the individual at the center of the universe justifying

human dominance of the earth and promoting the spirit of competition and possession instead of the spirit of sharing and sympathy that the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* evince so clearly. Centuries of colonial domination have deprived us of the potential to develop living continuity with our own ecologically sound cultural heritage. We have to re-sensitize ourselves to the unique cultural lineage that was conceived in ecological wisdom and was *bio centric* as opposed to the *anthropocentric* scientific culture that was an offshoot of European Enlightenment.

The *Sangham* Age in South India is a unique instance of the ecological wisdom in collective practice. According to popular Tamil belief there were three *Sanghams*—or assemblies of Poets—founded by the Pandya Kings. The first one lasted for about 4440 years and was based in the now submerged south Madurai. Shiva and other gods and sages were also its founder-members. The second *Sangham* had its center at Kapata-puram and it lasted for about 3700 years. By then the gods had evacuated and mortals constituted a greater percentage of its membership. Kapata-puram was claimed by the sea and later Madurai became the seat of the third *Sangham*. This lasted for only 1850 years. Whatever be the controversy among the Tamil scholars regarding the age and duration of the period, there is a general acceptance of the organic nature of the body of work that is usually termed *Sangham* Literature. The period that spread prior to 250 C.E. and lasted for over five generations produced a unique body of poetry, that is usually classified under two heads—*Pattuppattu* (Ten Songs) and *Ettuthohai* (Eight Anthologies). These songs bear testimony to the metaphysics of a people who lived in extremely close relationship with nature and whose very thinking was biocentric.

Aintinai, or the five-fold categorisation of the environment into *Kurinci*, *Mullai*, *Marutam*, *Neidal* and *Palai*, combined with the corresponding flora and fauna, and should be seen as the earliest attempt by the *Sangam* poets towards the formulation of an environmental

aesthetics, where the human *bhava* seeks its correspondence in the natural *vibhava*. As A.K Ramanujan puts it, “the actual objective landscapes of Tamil country become the interior landscapes of Tamil poetry.” (p. 241). The mountain tracts and where the valley begins is the *Kurinci tinai*. Here in an idyllic surrounding the lovers come together; hence the *srngara rasa* is most often set in such a setting. In *mullai* the lonely woman bewails her lover and awaits his coming — the environment is the jungle and the rocky land bordering it. *Marutam*, where the land lies cultivated and fertile, becomes the scene where domestic happiness is invaded by infidelity and the forgotten wife quarrels with her besotted husband. The seashore is *neital*, and here the woman suffers the anguish of separation from her fond lover, while in *palai*, the desert land much close to both *kurinci* and *mullai*, the newly wed suffers the agony of her loneliness. This interlinking of the human and the non-human in a unified aesthesis is seen as the *natakavazhakkam* (cf. *natyadharmi*) as opposed to the *ulakiyavazhakkam* (cf. *lokadharmi*), the latter often being looked upon as of lesser importance. The *akam* poems abound in sensual descriptions of nature and the poet’s eye moves between the inner and the outer nature. A.K. Ramanujan has pointed out that a little-known book in Tamil by a botanist “documents one’s constant sense that these poets knew their flora and fauna: 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.” (*Poems of Love and War*, Delhi: OUP, 1985, p. 249). This also goes to prove that minute observation and classification of received knowledge in a scientific order need not necessarily lead to disorder and chaos; understanding at a higher level would certainly lead to a primal human sympathy. I would like to recall the

citation from Auvayyar I have cited as an epigraph to this essay: *Kattathu kaimannalavu, kallathathu ulahalavu* (all that we have learned is but a handful of earth, and all that we have not yet learned is as vast as the world). It is intellectual humility that this *Sangham* poet teaches us; a humility born in the face of the highest wisdom that is one with nature and all being. This necessarily forms the cornerstone of a world-view that needs to be desperately resuscitated.

4. Spatio-temporal Awareness

This integrated vision of all and everything was at the root of a pan-Indian culture despite its heterogeneity and diversity. Any casual survey of the artistic and architectural practices of this part of the world through the centuries would bring this aspect to light. In the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* (c. 5th-7th cent. AD) there is this story of a certain king who wishes to learn the whole meaning of painting, but is told by a certain sage that he must first know the theory of dancing. To this he agrees, because the laws of dancing imply the principles that govern painting. But the sage further insists that the king shall begin by studying music and song, for without a knowledge of all the arts, their effects in space and time cannot be fully understood, nor their purpose be achieved. Despite its legendary nature and *puranic* tone the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* offers a no nonsense common-sensical, clinical account of the arts. What I would like to point out is the intricate relationship of all knowledge that led to this perception. It is the outcome of a culture that founds itself on a metaphysics of cosmic unity and harmony on a universal *chhandas*. The aesthetics that derives from this is one that leads the human being through the path of *dharma* through *kama* and finally to *moksha* or redemption. It is an aesthetics that relishes with the infinite *Lila* of eternal unfolding.

The *Vedas* are considered to be the source of all learning and culture—not that everything has been recorded therein but only that they are to be utilized as a

spring-board to action. (What I intend here is not a reductive reading at all. My prime intention is to see the texts as impressive repositories of a unique way and mode of knowledge that is environment friendly and infused with mutual trust, respect for the living as well as the non-living founded on a collective harmony of existence.) According to popular belief, the *Vedas* are supposed to have issued forth from *Brahma* him-self—and he has four heads signifying the four directions. The *Rig Veda* sensitizes the human being to the essentials of all life and being; the *Yajur Veda* takes one closer to things themselves and infuses a participation; the *Sama Veda* satiates the human being's finer desires; and the *Atharva Veda* gives direction for a concretization of one's life. It is in the *Rig* that one comes across the hymns to *Agni*; the *Yajur* directs one to action and the *Sama* incorporates detailed narratives on music and art while in the *Atharva* one reads the black magic practices and techniques and also detailed accounts of *Vastu Vidya* or architecture. At every point the *Vedas* are eco-friendly; there are directives to living with fire as well as ice but however, all life forms are accorded equal privilege and respect. One could summarize that the essence of *Veda* is this ecological wisdom. *What it recognizes is a cosmic balance a chhandas—a universal harmony.*

This view of the interrelationship of all and everything has been the determining factor in the visual experience and in the visual art practices of this part of the country too. The single perspectival practice or seeing things from one privileged point of view does not enable us to appreciate this art practice at all. No wonder the *Enlightened* eyes of Western Orientalists failed to make any sense of the multiple armed *Nataraja* Figurines. It calls for a different aesthetic sensitivity. What perhaps an Auguste Rodin would have understood—the vitality and vibrancy of the cosmic dance of Shiva aesthetically captured in one turbulent form, moving and unmoving in time. Here is the visual experience of multiple motion.

From this position, the struggle of the

Modern movement in the arts in Europe (1890-1930?) could be seen as the outcome of a collective encounter with non-European art practices. The African masks, Iberian art-forms, East-Asian sense of aesthetic space—all these contributed to the transformation of the post-Renaissance sensibility in Europe and America. The once dominant privileged single points of view and sense of realistic vanishing points gave place to the multiple planes and simultaneity of aesthetic experience. In more ways than one the rise of Abstract art in the West should be seen as the emergence of an aesthesis founded on a holistic experience. The reverence for all life forms and a democratic narrative that is bio-centric as opposed to the earlier anthropocentric, holds the promise of the blossoming of ecological wisdom.

In the *Isa Upanishad* we read:

*Isa vasyam idam sarvam. Yat kim ca jagatyam jagat,
Tena tyaktena bhunjita ma gridha kasyasvit dhanam*

The *mantra* invokes us to enjoy through abandonment. All this, all that moves in this world, is enveloped by God. Be it matter or mind or life or energy, call it what you will, there is a pervasive movement of a unified source that unites all and everything in its origin and continuity. Therefore, find your enjoyment in renunciation, for to whom does it all belong? Do not grab what belongs to others. This, I believe, is *Ecological Wisdom* in its sublime essence. What the history of European imperialism and colonial depredation, founded on the Hebraic-Judeo-Christian belief of one masculine potentate as creator, conceived under a metaphysics of power, dominance and subjugation, has effected is to wipe out the other non-European ways of thinking and living which had been eco-friendly and sensitive in every way to the pulsations of a vital universe. The need of the present is a shift in perception—a real paradigm shift—from the *anthropocentric* to the *bio-centric*, and herein we need to recognise the alter/native awareness

rooted in ecological wisdom that was once prevalent in this part of the world. We need to discover our own earthly roots, and uncover our own essential selves in the bargain. Do not grab what belongs to others, learn to share and sympathise.

4. A Culture of Sympathy

However, we cannot wish away the relapses of history. We are the inheritors of a colonial burden and our continuity with our own past has been disrupted not once but many times. And yet there does remain the traces of a unified sensibility to nature and a reverence for all life forms. It is my contention that we have to take stock of the present. A life free from regrets, remorse and misgivings is the only one that is true and healthy. So let us not attempt to turn the hands of the clock backwards but look forward to a dynamic future ahead. It needs to be a culture based on tolerance, adaptation and sympathy, in the primal sense of the word—harmony. We need science and its dynamism. We also need to save our *planet earth* as this is the only one we have. Let us invoke the *Ecological wisdom* our forefathers have bequeathed us and unite it with our present. *What we need now is an education based on this.*

Postscript

My essay had a strong foundation built upon my own prejudices and bias—something that couldn't be avoided—my subjectivity has certainly been conditioned by the cultural influx of my part of the world. My discontent with western metaphysics as founded on a patriarchal view of the world and life that did not allow any possibilities of inter-ethnic or inter-cultural dialogue, has been instrumental in my attempts at revalidating alter/native discourses and non-western values. I cannot conclude without citing a book by Frederic Turner that I came upon after I had written a large portion of my paper. The book is *The Culture of Hope: A New Birth of the Classical Spirit*. (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

Turner of course, is well aware of diversity and plurality and the necessity

of recognizing these as essentially valuable in themselves and not in any derivative status in terms of privileging one over the other. In his diagnosis the sickness of the *avant garde* and the postmodern is the collective product of a general cultural decadence founded on fear, shame and despair. To quote Turner:

Our dignity as human beings, paradoxically, depends upon the acceptance of our shame. To deny our shame is to attempt to fly away from the heavy weight of our past, to alienate ourselves from our present enjoyment of the spoils of our own ancestor's crimes. (p.57)

This complex of fear-shame-despair could be seen underwritten in the contemporary theoretical status of the West. However, what I found most disturbing in Turner's arguments is his outlook on European colonialism and its aftermath. After a detailed analysis of what has contributed to the myth of the West as solely dominating the "innocent" rest of the world, he asserts:

Though the techniques of the European conquerors felt to their victims like the special strangeness of an alien culture, this was a tragic illusion; science and technology were not merely a European invention or possession, but, . . . the direct creation of most of the human species, and indirectly the proper achievement of humanity as a whole. Colonial peoples such as those of India and Africa were sometimes unaware that they had contributed some of the key ideas that their colonial oppressors now used against them. (p.159)

Perhaps, I have been too drastic in my dismissal of the West and scientific values; I have not taken into consideration the fact the Europe was not unique in its practice of conquest and imperialism. The imperialistic expansion of Islam and the Chinese emperors, the expansion of the great Mughals, the epic conquests of African kingdoms and the now contentious Aryan invasion and enslavement of Dravidians, are further

cases in point. We have to take stock of the present and realize that we cannot redeem ourselves from the collective past of our human ancestry. Obviously, there is but one way open in front of us: the path of free integration and ecstatic union of the West and the East.

Now when one embarks on a project of rethinking education and culture as it forms the need of the hour, one needs to redefine one's own culture in the light of history and time. The task is a formidable one. We could of course recourse to or consciously redeem our ancient educational motto enshrined in the concept of the *Upanishads* where the *guru* and the *shishya* sat side by side and engaged in a dialogue of wisdom:

*Sa ha nav avatu, saha nau bhunaktu,
saha viryam karavavahai;
tejaswi nav adhitam astu; ma
vidvisavahai;
om shanthi, shanthi, shanthi*

(May he protect us both; may he be pleased with us both; may we work together with vigour; may our study make us illumined; may there be no dislike between us. Let there be peace.)

As a tail-piece a *Zen Koan*: A finger is necessary to point towards the moon but once the moon is observed, there is no need for the finger.

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S. Murali teaches English in Pondicherry University, Pondicherry

WOMEN'S STUDIES IN INDIA

Contours of Change

Edited by

Malashri Lal & Sukrita Paul Kumar

The discipline of "Women's Studies" has yet to establish firm roots in Indian academia. What causes an apparent mismatch between a recognised need to systematize an approach to social development and actualisation of that need in pedagogical practice? In the context of Indian universities in particular, such queries are crucial. To advocate its strengths, Women's Studies needs the mechanisms of institutionalisation. Materials production is a necessary, effective enterprise. The present anthology of essays is designed as teaching and library resource for Women's Studies. Drawing upon the expertise of major disciplines such as history, political science, sociology, psychology and literature, it focuses purposefully on aspects of female experience that conventional learning has either ignored or deliberately relegated to silence. Such damaging silence is now broken. That the women's movement and women's studies have a shared trajectory is established through their syncretic relationship set into interdisciplinary frames. Research areas are clearly indicated; the fruits of individual empirical investigation are generously shared. Be it an interview on empowerment policy or stereotypes in cinema, or a glance at the results of militancy, or a return to the pages of history, the issue of denied status to women surfaces over and over again. Yet the authors, by the fitness of their argument, uncover the past in order to move towards a more equitable future.

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