

The Four pillars - A semiotic study (Symbolism of Varuṇa Bhūtam-s mentioned in Cilappatikāram)

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Beliefs and customs grow in connection with the soil and nature present in a place where a 'community' gets formed and continues to live. With time, the beliefs and customs grow into rituals and are followed meticulously maintaining such beliefs. In this process, symbols get created which further evolves into visual representations like images and icons. Such thoughts, beliefs, icons, images all merge into art through time. In this way, it not only enters into the genre of arts, but also establishes the community coming together and continuing art, gradually becoming a living tradition.

Abhinava Gupta, commentator to Nāṭya Sastra denotes 'Nāṭya' as 'anukaraṇa' and asserts that anything and everything can be represented in nāṭya, and thus nāṭya becomes a world by itself. People, characters, situations, complexities of nature, complexities of human mind, all get to be presented in a space, where people gather, watch and relish. In such a happening the stage space also becomes part of the presentation. Each element and prop in the performance space also becomes part and participative in that space. Thus, the space turns into a King's court, garden, a temple or a war field depending on the scene/ script/ performance.

Performance space in Cilappatikarām

Cilappatikāram gives a few pointers to a presentation space. The selection of land to construct an 'āṭal arāṅgu' (nāṭya śāla), the division between the presentation space and audience seating, the position of lights, seating order of musicians, the curtains - all find mention, including the four pillars that hold the ceiling of the performance space.

The four pillars are placed in four directions/corners of stage space and are respected as guardians of those directions. The name 'bhūtam' is given to them. They are representatives of four types of clans in any society and are given colours and such other attributes. The four pillars are:

No	Name	Representation	Colour
1	Aṅṭaṇar bhūtam/ Brāhmaṇa bhūtam	The learned clan	White
2	Arasa bhūtam	The royal clan	Coral
3	Vaṇika bhūtam	The merchant clan	Gold
4	Vēḷān bhūtam	The working clan	Blue

Bhūtam – personification

The word 'Bhūtam' roughly translates to 'goblin' or sometimes, 'devil'. The name itself signifies that it is super human or super natural element, or an entity beyond human comprehension. It is also a name that is given to personify a concept or matter. Sometimes, these entities are elevated to a status of demi-gods. The term 'pañca-bhūtam' is an example, which is given to the prime elements of nature (i.e., space, air, fire, water and land)

These entities are treated like living beings and there are various traditions from various parts of the country, where they are worshipped. As part of the ritualistic performance, the person who worships could get possessed by that spirit. Theyyam, a ritualistic dance of Kerala is understood as a



personification or 'possessed dance' by a range of Gods and demi-gods. In Karnataka region too, elaborate dressing up similar to the Theyyam of Kerala is done, which is termed as 'Bhūta kōla'. It is believed that the word 'teivam', which means God in Tamil, became 'teiyam' in due course of time.

Thus propitiating such forces of nature or demi-gods and the person taking up this ritualistic performance gets possessed by the force has been a living tradition in different communities in various regions. The Teiyyam and Bhūta kōla rituals are performed in common spaces, when the worshipped divinity is common to a community. Sometimes when the ancestors are worshipped, it is performed in ancestral homes.

Other than ancestors worship or spirit worship, it is also interesting to note tree worship, serpent worship, goddesses of diseases, *grāma-devata* worship, hero worship - are also found being practised for centuries with great belief, year after year.

Fear and Respect

The fear factor has been an important reason to surrender and respect certain forces. Semiotic studies show that, whenever Man found any force or object more than his comprehension, there was a fear that sets in, which later turns to respect. In Indian culture, many such identities have been given a form and attributes. They were propitiated and it was a belief that if those energies were kept 'cool' and 'pacified', they would be protective than destructive. And their wrath will not affect people.

For eg., when fire is used for cooking it is a beneficial element. The same fire when rises huge, it creates fear. Fire, thus could be constructive or destructive. The magnitude and purpose, changes the approach from being beneficial or detrimental. Fire is respected as one of the five primordial elements. The name 'agni' is given and respected as 'agni devata'. The five primordial elements are called 'pañca bhūta', and the others are Ether, Water, Air and Land.

While a name is given to an element/ natural force/ concept, along with that a particular form and certain attributes also get created. Agni is described as having two faces, three or seven tongues, three legs etc. His vāhana is 'ram' or goat. He has two wives 'swāha' and 'svadha'.

Other than the pañca bhūta-s, there are eight demi-gods who are presiding deities of eight cardinal directions, gods for various aspects of life – eg., 'cupid'- god of love, Gods for diseases – eg., 'mariamamma' and many such that have been personified through time.

Depending on the nature of such concepts they are respected as Gods, sometimes as demi-gods and sometimes 'goblins' or even 'devils'. Owing to the proportion of positivity or constructive nature, one is called as God and if the destructive nature is more they are called as 'bhūtam-s'

Names of four such 'bhūtam-s' (representations of four clans in a society) are mentioned in the section, 'azaṛpaṭu kātai' of Cilappatikāram.

Propitiation dances performed by Mādhavi

Mādhavi, a lead character in the Epic Cilappatikāram, is a dancer. Earlier, in araṅgetṭruk kātai, Ilango Aṭigaḷ mentions the prowess of Mādhavi in her dance and how she was acknowledged by title, 'talaikkōl' by the King. Talaikkōl is a title, which means 'lead artist' and was given by the King and learned men, after ascertaining the merits of a performer. Mādhavi impressed the kingsmen by her maiden performance



and received the title. Cilappatikaram further mentions the types of dances she performed appropriately for various occasions. Accordingly, she performed 'Nilā kavuttuvam', in the evening performances and 'Sūryan Kavuttuvam' in morning performances and 'Māyōn kavuttuvam', at other times. It shall be noted that kavuttuvam-s are ritualistic numbers of dance where a particular energy/god is invoked. Mādhavi performed the 'Patinōru āṭal' in the Indra vizha, mentioned in Kaṭalāṭu kātai.

Mention of the varuṇa bhūtam-s in Azarpaṭukātai

Azarpaṭukātai is the 22nd episode in the epic, where an enraged Kaṇṇagi sets the city of Maturai into flames. Ilango Aṭikaḷ mentions that due to the blunder in maintaining law by the King, the Goddess of the city of Maturai, called as Maturāpati deivam, left the city. Following her, the four 'varuṇa bhūtam-s' left the city.

The four bhūtam-s – two sets of names

The four bhūtam-s, names of which are mentioned earlier, are representations of four clans of any society – learned clan, ruling clan, business clan and working clan.

While Ilango Aṭikaḷ gives names of the varuṇa bhūtam-s as: aṅṭaṇar bhūtam, arasar bhūtam, vaṇika bhūtam and vēḷāṇ bhūtam, Aṭiyārkkku nallār gives four other names to the same. They are: Vajra dēhan, Vajra daṅṭan, Varuṇaṅ & (I)Rattakēsvaran. They are the guardian deities for the four classes.

Vajra dēhan: Dēha is body. It is essential that the royal clan, especially the kings are physically well built and trained for strength and stamina. This deity is the guardian deity for the Kings, i.e., 'arasar'.

Vajra daṅṭan: Daṅṭa means tooth. This seems to be connected with reference to speech and education. Brahmins are the people who take up to education and study of scriptures and follow them. Therefore this must be the guardian deity for the Brahmin clan, i.e., 'aṅṭaṇar'

Varuṇaṅ: Varuṇa is symbolic of (water) flow. Incidentally the name varuṇa is given to the god of waters. Like how water flows, money also flows in the business class. Therefore this is understood as the guardian deity of the business clan, i.e., 'vaṇikar'

(It shall be noted that the name of water god Varuṇa, shall not be confused with the name varuṇa bhūtam, even though the pronunciation is the same)

(I)rattakēsvaran: Blood is symbolic of energy and physical work. Working class people carry out orders and do their work on various materials like wood, metal, gold, leather, farmlands etc. Therefore this is the guardian deity of working class.

Attributes given for the four bhūtam-s:

Description and attributes of the four bhūtam-s are found in azarpaṭu kātai. Verses 16-33 are for aṅṭaṇar bhūtam, verses 37-50 for arasar bhūtam, verses 67-84 for vaṇika bhūtam and verses 89-96 for vēḷāṇ bhūtam. Accordingly:

1. **Aṅṭaṇar bhūtam:** One who wears pearl, white thread, moon like countenance (tējas), holding white lotus, darbha grass and nandiyāvaṭṭai (*Tabernaemontana divaricata*) flowers, wearing a tuft in head, white dress, one who sits in front of fire every day (agni hōtrī), one who looks for milk, honey and jaggery for his rituals, one who goes on pilgrimage to places where there are rivers and temples, sits in Yagña, wakes up early in the morning and moves out, holds a stick, water jug etc and whose hand always

is a book and whose tongue always keeps chanting the vedas.

2. Arasa bhūtam: Glowing like the red hued sun, wearing shining jewels, a crown, wearing flowers like shenbakam (*Michelia champaca*), karuvilaiy (*strobilanthes callosa*), seng koothalam (*Crossandra infundibuliformis*), fragrant flowers both on trees and in creepers, garlands of water flowers, also on arms and chest, rings in fingers, reddish kumkum on chest, red garment of silk, holding paddy and golden pot, one who likes to eat hot food, wearing coral on the chest, also having goad, spear, flag, drum etc and seated gloriously under a white umbrella.

3. Vanika bhūtam: Wearing red and gold ornaments, looks like a king, also wears a crown, carries a balance in hand as well as plough, wears gold colour garment, wears flowers like veṭchi (*ixora*), tāzhai (*Pandanus odorifer*), āmbal (*Nymphaea nouchali*), neiytal (*nymphaea stellata willd*), pūlai (*Aerva Lanata*), marutam (*lagerstroemia speciosa*), smeared with sandal paste, ornaments on the chest, happily partakes food made with koḷlu (horse gram), payaṟu (green gram), tuvarai (pigeon pea), uḷuntu and paddy. He eats rich food early in the day and happily listens to the 'yaz' (string instrument), owns huge wealth like ocean and mountain; he buys and sells produce and helps people who do work of farming.

4. Vēḷāṇ bhūtam: He looks dark hued, wears silver ornaments, smears fragrance of 'akil' (*Aquilaria khasiana*) in his body, wide chested, wears flowers of land, creepers, water and land; holds a plough and wears dull clothes.

Catur-vida Abhinaya in the context of the varuṇa butam-s

The given attributes of the four clans also serve as indicators, to present such characters in dance/theatre presentations. The attire and body language are helpful to present the character in a convincing manner. Communication could be brought forward by body, sound, props and emotions and are given technical names as: Āngika, Vācika, Ahārya & Sātvika abhinaya. Given below are clues for catur-vidha abhinaya or four types of communication for the four varuṇa bhūtam-s

1. Antanar bhūtam:

- Āngika & activity : Sits in front of fire, travels on pilgrimage to places where there are rivers and temples, walks with short steps. They conduct yagña, recite Vedas and take up teaching
- Vācika: soft spoken; chants Vedas, teaches lessons to students
- Ahārya: wears white thread, looks luminant, holds white lotus, darbha grass, nandiyāvattai flowers, wears white dress, has a tuft in head
- Sātvika: Keeps calm, balanced nature, sātvik in nature

2. Arasa bhūtam:

- Āngika & Activity: Energetic, valiant - seated under a white umbrella. They conduct war and administration, takes care of citizens and uphold law.
- Vācika: Loud in speaking
- Āhārya: Reddish hued, wearing shining jewels, crown, wearing flowers like: shenbakam, karuvilaiy, seng-koothalam, garlands with fragrant flowers, smeared kumkum on chest, red silk garment, holding paddy, golden pot; wears corals on chest, holds goad, spear, flag, drum
- Sātvika: Likes to eat hot food, energetic nature; Rājasic in nature

3. Vanika bhūtam:

- Āngika and activity: Active and calculative. Enjoys life, buys and sells produce, happily listens to



'yazh'

b. Vācika: speaks in pleasant manner

c. Āhārya: wears red and gold garment, looks like a king. Wears a head ornament, carries a balance in hand and also a plough. Wears sandal paste, ornaments in chest. Owns huge wealth like ocean and mountain

d. Sātvika: Eats rich food, helps people who do farming work

4. Vēḷān bhūtam:

a. Āngika and activity: Undertaking tough physical exerting work, wide chested. They till land, water crops, hold a plough etc

b. Vācika: Hesitant talk

c. Āhārya: wears silver ornaments, smears fragrance of 'akil' in his body, wears flowers and creepers of the land, dull clothes

d. Sātvika: They are hard working, tāmasic natured.

Observations:

The description & attributes of the four clans reveal the following:

1. Any society is made of four clans
2. Their sync and interaction contributes to the balance and prosperity of the society
3. The idea that a concept being given a form and duly respected is seen in semiotic study
4. The four clans are given a form of pillars that hold an auditorium
5. The names given by Ilaṅgo Aṭiḡal are different from names given by Aṭiyārkkū Nallār
5. The belief that propitiating them will help maintaining the balance in the society is seen
6. That the four bhūtam-s leave the city of Maturai, denotes the ensuing destruction to the city
7. The duties carried by each of them are all important and they maintain their duty and responsibility
8. Aṭiyārkkū Nallār mentions in Arangētruk kātai, that he will elaborate about kavuttuvam in 'azarpaṭukātai'. (Kavuttuvam-s are ritualists dance items, performed to propitiate a particular energy. Kavuttuvam-s were performed in temples for Gods and also demi-gods). This is a strong reference to the early form of kavuttuvam-s. The four guardians/ four directions must have later extended to be guardians of eight directions and nine including Brahma (who is in the centre), when the āgama sāstrā-s came up. The dwajasthamba (Pillar for flag, generally the central energy in a temple built following rules of Āgama sāstra) was the centre point of the temple structure, which was the seat of Brahma. Then the guardians of eight directions were installed. In fact, the later 'navasanti' kavuttuvam-s must have been a growth from this concept.

Thus a huge transition from fear and respect that was felt in the human mind, which transformed into creation of symbols and propitiation is noticed through the understanding of the concept of the four pillars – the varuṇa bhūtam-s. The culture has made this in the most befitting aesthetic representation exposing the artistic mind.



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(தேசியத் தர மறுமதிப்பீட்டில் 'A++' தகுதி பெற்றது (4வது சுழற்சி))
தமிழ் உயராய்வு மையம், மதுரை. மற்றும்
பிரணவ் தமிழியல் ஆய்விதழ்
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