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Omen as a Folk Belief System in Sangam Literature

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ABSTRACT

Sangam literature, an early South Indian literary tradition, reveals the strong connection between people, nature and culture. The poems in Sangam literature are primarily divided into *Akam* and *Puram*, wherein *Akam* deals with inner emotions, while *Puram* deals with external life. The *Tinai* system is essential to *Akam* poetry, where every landscape conveys a specific emotion, season, mood, Deity and lifestyle. In this ecological and cultural context, natural elements often function as more than simple background visuals, transforming into meaningful cues that shape human understanding and emotional responses. Among these cultural practices, the concept of omen is vital to the folk belief system of ancient Tamil society.

Although omens are mentioned in Sangam poetry, the main focus here is on *Mullaippattu* and *Nedunalvadai*. In these works, landscape are not just quiet backdrops but active cultural spaces, where signs and signals naturally emerge from the environment associated with each *tinai*. This paper seeks to explore how a specific environment determines the types of signs that people look for. Whether it be a particular animal, a change in weather or some other local feature, people have historically drawn upon patterns within their immediate surroundings to build meaning. Poets take these simple, everyday elements of a specific landscape and transform them into signs to describe hope, fear, success or sorrow.

Key Words: Omens, Culture, Belief, Nature, *Akam*, *Puram*

Introduction

A belief system is a framework of shared ideas, values and truths that enables a group of people to interpret the world around them. It determines their way of life, their actions and how they perceive things they struggle to explain. These systems don't just appear randomly; they evolve naturally over generations from a community's everyday experiences, history, traditions and deep connections to their environment. When individuals notice recurring patterns in nature, they start to assign deeper meanings to them, which eventually lead to cultural beliefs. One significant method this occurred in ancient times was through the interpretation of omens. The word omen derives from the old Latin word *ōmen*, which signifies a sign or fear that indicates the future. Literary critics and anthropologists define an omen as an event or natural



phenomenon believed to convey a message from the spiritual realm, indicating either good fortune or impending danger. Scholars note that these signs serve as a psychological bridge, helping humans find certainty in an unpredictable world through interpreting the canvas of nature.

In ancient Tamil society, these folk beliefs were an integral part of daily life. People didn't perceive nature as distinct from themselves; instead, they consistently interpreted natural signs, sounds, dreams, the flight of birds and unexpected happenings as direct omens and portents. Sangam literature beautifully maintains these ancient folk beliefs, revealing to us that reading the environment was a practical, everyday skill. What truly makes the Sangam tradition unique is the manner in which these omens are connected with the *Tinai* system. The Tamil landscape is divided into five distinct geographical regions (*tinai*), each possessing its own unique natural characteristics, seasons, flora and fauna. Ancient poets didn't merely focus on generic signs; rather, they grounded their omens entirely in the specific nature and objects indigenous to that particular region. Whatever was naturally present and active within a specific region became the source of omen for the people living there.

Among the essential collection of Sangam Literature, *Patthuppattu* or Ten Idylls holds a significant place. While all ten poems in this anthology describe omens in distinct ways, this paper focuses on two specific texts that represent different landscapes: *Mullaippattu* and *Nedunalvadai*. Both texts utilize their unique regional elements to reflect the inner emotions of their characters, transforming the physical environment into a vibrant language of signs.

Concept of Omen in Folk Tradition

Omen is a deeply rooted cultural notion that perceives the physical world as an active, talking entity. In folk practices, omen work as a living sign system where natural occurrences, sounds or sudden shift are interpreted as messages that predict the future events. Instead of viewing events as simple coincidences, folk culture function on the principle that human fate and the environment are intrinsically connected. These omens usually come in two different types: good omens (*Nalla-Nimittam*), which bring calm and suggest success or acceptance and bad omens (*Teethu-Nimittam*), which act as warnings of trouble, failure or being apart. As a result of this division, omens play a key part in how decisions are made. Before starting a journey, gathering in the harvest or heading into a battle, people and rulers alike observe these natural signs to mitigate risks, attain peace of mind or avoid disaster.

In folk culture, these signs are generally drawn from five primary sources: the cries and flight patterns of birds, unusual animal behaviour, words spoken incidentally and overheard by chance, symbolic dreams experienced during sleep and sudden unexpected natural phenomena such as storms or eclipse. Sangam literature preserves these folk traditions, integrating into *tinai* system, in which each geographical region utilizes its indigenous environment and daily activities to interpret these signs.

In the *Kurinji* region (mountains), the main signs of danger and success are thought to be the calls of certain birds, the sudden behavior of wild animals or the sound made by small creatures like lizards (*palli*), which help estimate safety levels. For example, whether a hunter was going hunting or a lover was taking a dark mountain path, the direction and number of lizard's calls were regarded as direct omens. A call coming from right side meant good fortune, while a sudden, loud call from directly above was a warning of danger, prompting them into immediately half journey. This belief is inherent in classical Tamil verses, where the heroine or her companion listens to the lizard's call (*palli col*) to foretell the hero's safe return via dangerous mountain path:

செல்லுநர்க்கு
உறுவது கூறும் சிறு செந்நாவின்
மணி ஓர்த்தன்ன தெண்குரல்
கணிவாய்ப் பல்லிய காடு இறந்தோரே



Chellunarkku
Uruvathu koorum siru sennāvin
Mani ōrthanna thenkural
Kanivāyyp palliya kādu iranthōrē. (Akananuru 151)

“and lizards resting on the thorny trunks of kalli trees in the shade of stone heaps covering shallow graves, cluck clearly with their small fine tongues, sounding like bells, as though they are announcing omens to those who go on the path.”

Shifting from mountains to forest region, it translates these signs into domestic life. In the forest paths and herding communities of this region, the daily behavior of birds is deeply connected to the emotions of the family waiting at home. This belief is celebrated in the *Kurunthogai*, where the call of a crow signals the safe return of the hero and dispels the heroine's profound sorrow:

முழுதுடன் விளைந்த வெண்ணெல் வெஞ்சோறு
எழு கலத்து ஏந்தினும் சிறிது, என் தோழி
பெருந்தோள் நெகிழ்த்த செல்லற்கு,
விருந்து வரக் கரைந்த காக்கையது பவியே.
Muzhuthudan vilaintha vennel venjōru
Ezhu kalathu ēnthinum sirithu, en thōzhi
Perunthōl negizhtha sellarku,

Virunthu vara karaintha kākkaiyathu paliyē. (Kurunthogai 210)

“it would have just been a small reward for the crow that called out the good omen that brought you and ended the distress that made my friend's thick arms become thin.”

Conversely, if a crow suddenly dropped a twig, it was regarded as a warning of sudden expenses or the arrival of a Tax collector.

In *Marutham* poetry, omens frequently focus on the native agriculture and small-field life, especially the *Nerunji* flower, which acts as a visual omen. In this landscape, the sudden blooming or changing state of local fields serves as an omen for marital transitions and household stability:

புன்புலத்து அமன்ற சிறியிலை நெருஞ்சிக்
கட்கு இன் புது மலர் முள் பயந்தாஅங்கு,
இனிய செய்த நம் காதலர்,
இன்னா செய்தல், நோம் என் நெஞ்சே
Punpulathu amantha siriylai nerunjik
Katku in puthu malar mul payanthaāngu,
Iniya seytha nam kāthalar,

Innā seythal, nōm en nenjē. (Kurunthogai 202)

“Like the new flowers of the densely growing, tiny-leaved nerunji plants of the arid land, that appear sweet to the eyes but yield thorns later, my lover who used to be sweet has become cruel now. My heart aches!”

Within the Neythal Tinai (coastal region), people coexisted so closely with the ocean that they viewed nature's evolving state as immediate omens for their lives. For a woman waiting for her lover, every single thing on beach was a sign; birds suddenly taking flight might indicate his arrival, while wilting flowers or a coming storm were considered bad omens of a long parting. As mentioned in *Kurunthogai*, the clear ringing of the chariot bells transforms from an auspicious omen of joyful reunion into a devastating symbol of a broken promise:

கொண்கன் ஊர்ந்த கொடுஞ்சி நெடுந்தேர்
தெண் கடல் அடைகரைத் தெளி மணி ஒலிப்பக்...



விளிவது மன்ற நோகோ யானே.
Koṅkaṇ ūrntha koṭuñci neṭunthēr
theṇ kaṭal aṭaikaraith theḷi maṇi olippak...
viḷivathu maṇra nōkō yāṇē. (Kurunthogai 212)

“The lord of the seashore rides his tall chariot with an ornamental, lotus-bud shaped... We see him when he comes. It is a shame that he leaves. This love is pitiful! It will be ruined, for sure. I will be sad.”
After observing these signs from nature, the people of *Neythal tinai* expressed their inner suffering through the physical signs on the beach.

In the desert poetry of the *Palai Tinai*, people sought to discover the meaning of their lives by observing how wild animals responded to nature. The *Akananuru* offers a good example, where a simple noise echoing across the desert is seen as a warning of separation and distress:

உறுகண் மழவர் உருள் கீண்டிட்
ஆறு செல் மாக்கள் சோறு பொதி வெண்குடைக்
கணை விசைக் கடு வளி எடுத்தலின், துணை செத்து
வெருள் ஏறு பயிரும் ஆங்கண்
கரு முக முசுவின் கானத்தானே.
urukaṇ maḷavar uruḷ kīṇṭiṭṭa
āru cel mākkal cōru poti veṅkuṭaik
kaṇai vicaik kaṭu vaḷi eṭuttaliṇ, tuṇai cettu
veruḷ ēru payirum āṅkaṇ
karu muka mucuviṇ kāṇattāṇē.

“where a fearing stag calls his mate on hearing sounds he thinks are from fast arrows, which are from harsh winds that move around the empty white palm rice bowls thrown away by those who go on the path created by the chariot wheels of harsh warriors...”

Through this omen, poem elegantly explains how the people of *Palai* region perceive the startling sounds of that desolate place as an immediate warning of harm and sorrow.

By incorporating these specific environmental elements into texts, classical Tamil poetry shows that ancient folk beliefs were not just abstract superstitions, but a practical, everyday language entirely structured around the geography of land.

Omens in *Mullaippattu* and *Nedunalvadai*

In *Mullaippattu* composed by Napputhanar, the theme of waiting, connecting deeply to the environment and human life. The poem vividly captures the real-life events and emotional struggle of women, particularly the heroine, who are left alone at home, anxiously waiting the return of their husband from the war as the rainy season starts. In order to manage their fears and seek peace, these women and their community look to their surroundings and verbal signs. This work systematically blends these everyday local beliefs into a poetic form through three main aspects: nature, language and rituals.

In the *Tinai* framework, the landscape is not a static backdrop; it functions as a living system whose seasonal shifts mirror and predict human actions. The poem opens with a natural phenomenon—the arrival of rainy season—which serve as a cosmic sign that the time for hero’s return has arrived. The poet likens the dark, heavy clouds to a deity towering over the earth, noting that the “*The rising rain clouds appeared like towering Thirumal*”:

நீர் செல நிமிர்ந்த மாஅல் போல,
பாடு இமிழ் பணிக்கடல் பருகி, வலன் ஏர்பு,
கோடு கொண்டு எழுந்த கொடுஞ் செலவு எழிலி



*nīr cela nimirntha māal pōla,
pāṭu imiḷ paṇikkāṭal paruki, valaṇ ērpu,
kōṭu koṇṭu eḷuntha koṭuñ celavu eḷili. (Mullaippattu 3-6)*

clouds that absorbed water from the roaring,
Cold ocean rose up with strength up to the
Mountains with great speed, appearing like
Thirumal Who protects the vast earth...

This sudden gathering of rain clouds carries a dual significance. For the landscape, it brings rain to the forest; whereas for the heroine, it serves as a visual omen that the season of war is now drawing to a close and the season of return has begun.

In Mullaippattu, the practice of seeking omen is framed as community ritual. The elderly women don't look for signs by chance; they perform specific rituals to invite a clear communication from the universe. For a reliable omen, elderly women carry measuring bowls filled with freshly harvested paddy grains and local jasmine flower buds. They scatter these grains and opening jasmine blossoms on the ground while pressing their hands together in deep prayer, as swarming bees hum around the fresh nectar like the music of a lute:

*அருங்கடி மூதூர் மருங்கில் போகி,
யாழ் இசை இன வண்டு ஆர்ப்ப, நெல்லொடு
நாழி கொண்ட நறு வீ முல்லை
அரும்பு அவிழ் அலரி தூஉய்க் கைதொழுது,
பெருமுது பெண்டிர் விரிச்சி நிற்பச்,
aruṅkaṭi mūtūr maruṅkil pōki,
yāḷ icai iṇa vaṇṭu ārppa, nelloṭu
nāḷi koṇṭa naṟu vī mullai
arumpu aviḷ alari tūuyk kaitōḷutu,
perumuthu peṇṭir viricci nirpac, (Mullaippattu 7-11)*

Elderly women went near the well protected
Ancient town carrying rice paddy and mullai
Flowers in their bowls, and prayed with their
Palms pressed together, sprinkling newly opened,
Fragrant mullai blossoms as swarming bees
Hummed like yazh music, and waited for a good omen.

Instead of just passively predicting a reunion via nature, the buzzing bees and jasmine are part of scared place.

When the heroine's pain is unbearable, the elderly women head out in the evening to the edge of the ancient town to seek an omen through *Viricci*; the folk tradition of treating the casual, accidental words of strangers treated as direct divine message to predict the crisis's outcome. They don't ask anyone for predictions; instead after praying, they quietly wait to overhear the first words spoken by passing strangers. In that quiet moment, they observe a scene native to the pastoral *Mullai* land described in the poem:

*சிறு தாம்பு தொடுத்த பசலைக் கன்றின்
உறு துயர் அலமரல் நோக்கி, ஆய்மகள்
நடுங்கு சுவல் அசைத்த கையள், “கைய
கொடுங்கோல் கோவலர் பின் நின்று உய்த்தர,
இன்னே வருகுவர் தாயர்” என்போள்*

நன்னர் நன்மொழி கேட்டனம், அதனால்,...
cīru tāmpu toṭutta pacalaik kaṇṇiṇ
uṟu tuyar alamaraḷ nōkki, āymakaḷ
naṭuṅku cuval acaitta kaiyaḷ, “kaiya
koṭuṅkōl kōvalar piṇ niṇru uyttara,
iṇṇē varukuvar tāyar” eṇṇōḷ

nanṇar nanṇmoli kēṭṭaṇam, ataṇāl, (Mullaippattu 12-17)

A young calf-tied to a small rope was in
Deep distress. On seeing that, a herder
Women with arms clasped around her
Shoulders said to the calves, “Your mothers
Will come soon, nudged behind by herders
With rods with curved ends”.

The elderly women waiting nearby heard these words and interpreted them as auspicious omen (*nimmitta* or *viricci*). The girl’s simple, domestic assurance, that the cows would return safely under the guidance of the herdsman, thus transformed into a structural omen signifying that the hero, too, would return safely and swiftly from his military campaign. After hearing these reassuring words, the elderly women return to the well-guarded palace to inform the weeping heroine about the good omen. The elderly women try to use the omen to instantly provide peace of mind to the distressed heroine:

நல்ல நல்லோர் வாய்ப்புள், தெவ்வர்
முனை கவர்ந்து கொண்ட திறையர் வினை முடித்து
வருதல் தலைவர் வாய்வது, நீ நின்
பருவரல் எவ்வம் களை மாயோய், எனக்
Nalla nallor vayppul tevvar
Munai kavarttu konta tiraiyar vinai muttittu
Varutal talaivar vinai mutittu
Varutal talaivar vayvatu, nin

Paruvaral evvam kalai mayoy enak (Mullaippattu 18-21)

The elderly women who heard that,
Took that as a goof omen and said to the queen
“we’ve heard goof words. Your
Husband will return with tributes from
His enemies, for sure. His work has ended
Oh dark hued woman! Get rid of your sorrow”.

In this context, omen is important because it connects two completely different worlds. Hearing a normal, daily conversation about the cattle coming home, the elderly women get a sign that the distant war will end with victory, the herder’s girl words give these elderly women to comfort the heroine, helping them try to lessen her deep sorrow and assure her that the hero will come back.

Nakkirar's *Nedunalvadai* presents a shift in environmental and ritualistic cues from the soft, rustic environment of *Mullai* to a harsh setting, contrasting waiting (*akam*) with victory in war (*puram*). The entire scene, primarily established within the structure of the cold season (kuthir-kalam) and the fierce northerly winter wind (Vatai), serve as a collective, large-scale omen that reflects the severe emotions and political tensions of isolation. The text opens with an extensive description of divine and climatic shifts that serve as a sign of absolute disruption, noting:

வையகம் பனிப்ப வலன் ஏர்பு வளைஇப்,



பொய்யா வானம் புதுப் பெயல் பொழிந்தென,
vaiyakam paṇippa valaṅ ēṟpu valai'ip,
poyyā vāṇam putup peyal polinteṇa; (Nedunalvadai 1-2)
“unfailing clouds climbed to the right,
circling and chilling the earth and came
down as fresh rains”

The poem creates a brilliant contradiction by delivering a good omen and a bad omen at the exact same time. On one hand, the clouds circling to the right (*valaṅ ēṟpu*) act as a highly auspicious good omen, showing that the universe is aligned and bringing an unfailing blessing (*poyyā vāṇam*) that promises the king's eventual victory. On the other hand, this blessing brings a brutal, freezing cold (*paṇippa*) that completely disrupts the animal kingdom, forcing cows to forget to graze and monkeys to freeze in the hills. This sudden breakdown of natural instinct operates as a terrifying bad omen for the domestic space. It warns of deep human suffering, perfectly mirroring the cold, empty loneliness of the queen trapped inside her palace. As the scene moves inside the palace, the physical structures and internal objects of the royal dwelling are interpreted through symbolic signs. The queen sits in her magnificent, quiet chambers, staring blankly at a beautifully crafted foreign lamp held by a metal statue:

யவனர் இயற்றிய வினை மாண் பாவை,
கை ஏந்தும் ஐ அகல் நிறைய நெய் சொரிந்து,
பருஉத்திரி கொளீஇய குருஉத்தலை நிமிர் எரி,
அறு அறு காலைதோறு அமைவரப் பண்ணிப்,
பல் வேறு பள்ளிதொறும் பாய் இருள் நீங்கப்,
பீடு கெழு சிறப்பின் பெருந்தகை அல்லது,
ஆடவர் குறுகா அருங்கடி வரைப்பின்
yavanar iyarriya viṇai māṅ pāvai,
kai ēntum ai akal niraia ney corintu,
parū'uttiri koḷī'ya kurū'uttalai nimir eri,
aru aru kālaitōru amaivarap paṇṇip,
pal vēru paḷlitōrum pāy iruḷ nīṅkap,
pīṭu keḷu ciṟappiṅ peruntakai allatu,

āṭavar kuṟukā aruṅkaṭi vairappiṅ (Nedunalvadai 101-107)

Skillfully crafted by Yavanars,
fabulous female figurine lamps, their
hands holding amazing oil wells,
were lit with upward-tilting thick wicks
topped by golden flames.
Oil was poured into the wells whenever
the levels went down, and the wicks were
adjusted. Pitch darkness vanished from the various
rooms of the queen's chambers of the
well-guarded palace, where no other male
could enter except the proud, splendid
and eminent king.

The burning lamp, flickering against the cold drafts in the silent palace, becomes a stark visual sign of the queen's fragile emotional state and a domestic omen of her long, lonely vigil. Her elderly palace women, seeing her deep sorrow, do not perform the outdoor *Viricci* ritual like the cowherds in *Mullaippattu*; instead, they stand inside her chambers, offering prayers directly to Rohini, the star of fidelity and union, begging for a sign of relief. They try to comfort the weeping queen by offering verbal assurance, urging her to find hope in the steadfast nature of the king's duty: “Your lord is not wasting time; he is performing his rightful duty in the camp, caring for his wounded soldiers” (*Nedunalvadaï* 170-180).

In the war camp, the cold environment is countered by a powerful living sign system that acts as a prophecy of victory. While the nocturnal energy of the horses provides a positive omen (*nallanimittam*), the true psychological turning point occurs when the king inspects his camp at midnight. The text states:

ஒடையொடு பொலிந்த வினை நவில் யானை
நீள் திரள் தடக்கை நில மிசைப் புரள,
களிறு களம்படுத்த பெருஞ்செய் ஆடவர்
ஒளிறு வால் விழுப்புண் காணிய, புறம் போந்து
ōṭaiyoṭu polinta viṇai navil yāṇai
nīḷ tiral taṭakkai nila micaip puraḷa,
kaḷiru kaḷampaṭutta peruñcey āṭavar

oḷiru vāl viṇuppuṇ kāṇiya, puram pōntu (*Nedunalvadaï* 170-174)

The king stepped out of his quarters
to see his brave warriors, wounded
by bright swords, men who killed
battle-trained elephants donning
shining face ornaments, chopping off
their long, thick, big trunks
that dropped and rolled on the ground.

This highlights the king stepping out into the brutal weather to personally inspect the glorious, deep chest wounds (*viṇuppuṇ*) of his brave warriors, men who have just felled mighty enemy war elephants whose massive trunks now lie severed on the earth. The collective endurance of these bleeding soldiers, who smile despite their deep cuts as the king praises them, creates an unshakeable social prophecy. Under the freezing rain, the king's direct presence serves as the ultimate sign that the cosmic balance has shifted in their favor. For the army, this midnight ritual confirms that their sacrifice is recognized, making their eventual triumph and the gathering of tribute completely assured.

Ultimately, *Nedunalvadaï* uses the extreme elements of the landscape—the bitter northern wind, the shivering monkeys, the birds falling from the trees, the flickering palace lamp, and the restless war horses—to create a unified language of signs. By mapping these intense environmental shifts directly onto the psychological distress of the queen and the military duties of the king, the text illustrates how ancient Tamil culture viewed nature not as a separate entity, but as a living canvas that reflected and predicted the hardships, duties, and fates of human beings.

Landscape, Cultural meaning-making, Emotional Perseverance

The precise placements of omens within specific geographical zones illustrates a beautiful process of cultural meaning-making, proving that ancient Tamil life was, ultimately a bond between human and their land. The people of Sangam era coexisted with nature, rather than opposing it. Every forest path, every drop of monsoon rain and every bird soaring across the evening sky felt to them like a close relative. Instead of seeing their environment as a neutral background, they turned their landscapes into a very clear,

conversational psychological space. Their everyday lives, whether animal farming, field work or waiting for a hero to return from war, was so tied to the land's rhythms, their hearts naturally looked to nature for answers. Their shared daily belief was that the universe never stops talking, but always speaks to them in a quiet, comforting language of signs.

When life grew tough or unpredictable, these daily reminders became a crucial support for the human spirit; they acted as a hands-on method for managing intense emotional strain. Imagine a young woman alone in a quiet home, listening to the howling winter wind, terrified for her husband, who is far away on a battlefield. The silence and distance could easily have broken her. To endure the pain of separation, she used the world around her for support. Whenever she saw a small bird building a safe nest, or heard the casual words of a passing neighbor, her anxiety would instantly lessen. These moments were not seen as mere coincidences; instead, they were accepted as tender, profound signs that her beloved was safe and would return soon.

By reading the land in this way, the ancient Tamils found a profound method for keeping hope alive during their darkest, most uncertain hours. This emotional reliance on signs transformed a painful, static state of waiting into an active, hopeful observation. By turning a random everyday moment into a reassuring message from the land, the omen transforms helpless worry into a steady, patient hope. It assured them that their personal suffering was not isolated, but was instead deeply connected to a larger, comforting cosmic order. This deep cultural belief taught them a timeless truth: that no human being is ever truly alone or forgotten, because the very land beneath their feet is always watching over them, reflecting their sorrows, and whispering that balance and reunion are on the way.

Conclusion

Sangam poems are not merely relics of ancient history; they serve as an eternal guide on how to live life to the fullest and truly experience what it means to be alive. They remind us that human existence finds its deepest meaning when we connect with everything around us. This does not imply viewing nature as a detached spectator, one who simply admires a beautiful scene, but rather signifies the practice of true coexistence: finding a reflection of one's own joys, sorrows, and hopes within the very elements of nature itself.

In *Mullaippattu*, when the heroine is immersed in a sea of sorrow, the poem offers her a sense of serene solace and hope through the auspicious signs she perceives in the sight of jasmine buds, the sound of rain, and the calls of animals. Conversely, in *Nedunlavadai*, the harsh and biting wind blowing from the north perfectly mirrors the cold, piercing ache of loneliness felt by the queen as she sits alone within the palace. Whether nature offers solace through a gentle omen or echoes the pain of deep heartbreak through the fury of a winter storm, the human soul is never left in isolation. By weaving our deepest emotions into the fabric of the physical world, Sangam poetry breathes new life into our spirits; it affirms that we are never truly alone, for the world that lies just beyond our doorstep remains, in one form or another, an inseparable part of our lives.



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