

# NATURAL SOUNDS AND MUSIC AS DEPICTED IN TAMIL SANGAM LITERATURE

Dr. P. Nalini Priya

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Tamil, Avinashilingam institute for Home science and higher education for women, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu



## ABSTRACT

*The music of the ancient Tamils was deeply intertwined with nature. Humans lived by adapting to their environment using music and musical instruments. The idea of "Eethal Isai Pada Vaalthal" (living musically with nature) illustrates the antiquity of Tamil music. The word "Tamil" itself also conveys the meaning of music. Human life is inherently connected with music from birth to death. Music is the only medium through which people unite with the divine and proclaim its glory. This truth holds universally.*

*Musical expression varies based on the way it is produced: vocal (midar isai), string (narambisai), wind or blown instruments (kaatrakkaruvi isai), percussion instruments like drums (thulaikkaruvi isai), and body-percussion or surface instruments like skin drums (thoakkaruvi isai), and conical drums (kanjak karuvi isai). The music created reflects the natural life of the people. Its forms evolve depending on the environment, customs, language, and religious beliefs.*

*From ancient times to the present, music has been used both to relieve the weariness of labor and to express deep emotions. The harmonious sounds of nature have always stirred human feelings. This study seeks to examine how natural sounds influence people's lives by comparing them with musical sounds and instruments.*

**Keywords:** Midar Isai – Palliyam – Muzhakkisai – Asunam – Frogs – Yazh Isai – Vankiyam

## Introduction

Human beings, endowed with reasoning, have a more refined sense of sound than other living creatures. People have long found joy by relating musical sounds with natural sounds and those made by animals and birds. Even animals and birds, apart from humans, are drawn to music. The aim of this study is to explore and compare such musical appeal as reflected in classical Tamil literary songs.

## Comparing Natural Sounds with Musical Sounds

In several places in Sangam literature, the sweet tones of musical instruments are compared with the sounds of various living beings and natural phenomena. For instance:

The sound of a **waterfall** is compared to the **Parai drum**.

- The **rumble of thunder** is likened to the **Muzhakkisai** (a resonant percussive sound).
- The **buzzing of bees** is compared to the **melody of the Yazh** (a stringed instrument).
- The **call of the crane** is likened to the **sharp notes of the Seeriyazh** (a variant of Yazh).
- The **croaking of frogs** is compared to the **Palliyam** music (an ensemble of instruments).
- These comparisons are noteworthy and reflect the poetic sensitivity to the acoustic world.

## Waterfall Sound – Parai Drum Music

*"In the deep dark forest, where the sound of the Parai drum echoes like the roar of a waterfall..."*

— Purananuru 126:7-9

In this verse, the poet praises the king Malaiyaman Thirumudikkari, describing the forest's darkness and the resonant waterfall likened to the Parai drum. This metaphor shows how the sound of waterfalls was equated with percussive music in Sangam poetry.

## Thunder Sound – Muzhakkisai

*“As the rains thunder over the parched, barren land, the clouds roar with the sound of Muzhakkisai...”*

— Purananuru 381:17–19

Here, the booming thunder during a storm is compared to the intense drum music of Muzhakkisai, emphasizing the auditory force of nature paralleled in music.

### **Buzzing Bees – Yazh Music**

In a verse from *Natrinai 176*, a friend describes the heroine's village:

*“In her town, the red kanthal flowers bloom. Bees gather freshly to sip the nectar, buzzing sweetly like the Yazh's music. The roaring waterfalls sound like Muzhakkam drums.”*

These lines draw parallels between the bees' hum and the delicate string music of the Yazh, blending nature and musical beauty.

### **Crane's Cry – Seeriyazh String Music**

*“In front of the sacred god of strength,  
The sharp cry of the Seeriyazh echoes  
Like the gentle call of the crane.”*

— *Natrinai 189:3–4*

These lines are spoken by the heroine's friend, describing the hardships endured by the hero traveling through a desert. She notes that cranes by the Ganges river cry out like the Seeriyazh, a sharp-stringed Yazh played by bards. The comparison reveals the emotional sensitivity of nature, rendered through music.

### **Frogs – Palliyam Ensemble Music**

The word *Palliyam* is derived from *pal* + *iyam*, meaning "many instruments." It refers to a harmonious blend of various musical instruments, akin to an ensemble. It can also mean *murasu* (drum) or *suddha thandavam* (pure rhythmic dance).

*“At night, under the neem tree,  
When the tusked elephant retreats,  
The Palliyam ensemble echoes with the Yazh.”*

— *Purananuru 281:1–2*

And another verse:

*“After heavy rains flood the forest,  
The frogs croak joyfully in deep waters,  
Their chorus resonates like the sounds of Palliyam.”*

— *Akananuru 154:1–3*

The natural sound of frogs after rain is elevated to the status of ensemble music, showing the poetic imagination that saw rhythm and harmony in every corner of the natural world.

### **Buzzing Insects – Yazh Music Again**

*“Near the ancient, well-guarded town,  
The bees hum with a sweet resonance like the Yazh...”*

— *Mullai 7–8*

These lines describe the setting of a town in the *Mullai* landscape. The comparison of bee sounds to the Yazh's music shows how the gentle hum of bees was poetically appreciated as music.

*“On the mountain slope where elephants roam,  
Bees with bright-colored wings hum melodiously,  
Like birds that sound as sweet as the Yazh.”*

— *Akanamuru 332:7-8*

Here, birds and bees are both praised for producing sounds resembling the Yazh, emphasizing that even wild settings were considered musically rich.

### **Sound Sensitivity of Living Creatures – The Asunam**

*Asunam* refers to a creature no longer found today, but mentioned in Sangam poems. This creature was said to be drawn toward the sweet sound of the Yazh and flute, but would faint or die upon hearing loud percussion like the Parai or Murasu drums.

*“Those who hunt the Asunam would lure it  
By first playing the Yazh sweetly to attract it,  
Then beating the Parai to stun it,  
As if joy and pain coexist in it...”*

— *Natrinai 304:8*

The comparison is symbolic. Just as the *Asunam* is attracted to sweet music and killed by loud noise, the hero is depicted as one who once gave pleasure (like Yazh music) to the heroine but now causes her pain (like the drumbeat of separation). The imagery also illustrates the ancient people's keen observation of animal behavior in response to sound.

### **Birdsong – Flute Music**

The flute's tone is frequently compared with sounds from nature, especially those of birds. For example:

*“When the male Vanka bird is absent,  
The red-legged female Vanka calls out,  
Her cry like the music of the bamboo flute.”*

— *Kurunthogai 151:1-3*

This verse shows how the flute (made from bamboo) mimics the lament of a lonely female bird, drawing out the emotional power of sound.

### **Inspiration from Bamboo – Flute Sound**

The origin of the bamboo flute is attributed to the discovery of natural musical tones when wind passed through holes made by insects in bamboo stems. Hearing this natural music inspired humans to craft flutes.

*“By the stream shaded with thick trees,  
The breeze through hollow bamboo  
Produces the sound of a flute...”*

— *Akananuru 82:1-2*

*“The hollow bamboo pierced by insects,  
Filled with morning dew, resonates,  
Its music flows through shepherds’ flutes...”*

— Akananuru 225:5–8

These verses link natural occurrences—wind and bamboo—with the development of wind instruments. It is a poetic nod to how nature served as teacher and muse to early Tamil musicians.

### More Comparisons – Flute and Insects

Sangam poems often describe the sound of bees (*vandu*) and dragonflies (*thumbi*) in relation to flute music.

*“The sweet sound of the fine reed flute  
Resembles the soft buzzing of bees...”*

— Ainkurunuru 215:4

*“The bees and dragonflies hum in harmony  
Like the tones of a flute played in spring...”*

— Akananuru 245:16

*“The flute with sweet strings falls silent;  
In its place, bees buzz through the blossoms  
Like music echoing through the petals.”*

— Kalithogai 33:22–23

*“The tender buzzing of bees is as soft  
As a fine flute gently played...”*

— Kalithogai 119:8

These lines reflect the ability of poets to find music in even the smallest natural details. The buzzing of insects is not merely noise—it is poetry, emotion, and art.

### Nature and Music in Unity

Sangam poets portrayed landscapes as soundscapes, where nature itself became a musician. One famous verse (Akananuru 82:1–10) integrates multiple natural sounds and likens each to a musical instrument.

*“Near the dense forest, the breeze blows  
Through the holes in bamboo stalks  
And sounds like a fine flute.  
The gentle waterfall flows with sweet tones,  
Like the beat of the drum.  
The chorus of male deer echoes  
Like a deep, majestic wind instrument.  
Amidst mountain flowers, bees hum  
Like a graceful Yazh.  
Monkeys, enchanted by this harmony,  
ather to dance in wonder.  
In the thickets where bamboo thrives,  
Peacocks dance like festive dancers  
Entering a royal court in celebration...”*

— Akananuru 82:1–10

This verse is a masterclass in environmental imagery and musical metaphor. Wind, water, animals, and insects all become part of an orchestra conducted by nature. The mountain becomes a stage, the animals performers, and the music—both visual and auditory—is divine.

### Ancient Scale – Animals and the Seven Notes

In early Tamil music, the seven *swaras* (notes) were associated with animal sounds:

Swara (Note)	Tamil Name	Animal Compared
Sa	Kural	Peacock
Ri	Thuththam	Bull
Ga	Kaikkilai	Goat
Ma	Uzhai	Bird
Pa	Ili	Cuckoo
Da	Vilari	Horse
Ni	Thaaram	Elephant

This ancient theory showcases how early Tamils connected musical sound with their auditory environment. Each note mirrored the tone of a specific animal's voice, reinforcing the idea that music is born from nature.

### Birdsong and Emotional Resonance in Flute Music

Returning to the example of the female *Vangka* bird that loses her mate, Sangam poetry uses her sorrowful cry as a metaphor for emotional expression through flute music.

*“The red-legged Vangka bird, left by her mate,  
 Cries out like a bamboo flute,  
 When the Pulluru bird casts its shadow...”*

— *Kurunthogai 151:1-3*

Here, the bereaved bird becomes a symbol of love-lost, and her voice transforms into a mournful tune, much like the sound of a *veynguzhal* (bamboo flute). Nature and emotion blend seamlessly.

### Nature as Composer – Bamboo as Flute Maker

According to poetic tradition, the discovery of flute music was inspired by the sound of wind passing through holes made by bees in bamboo stalks.

*“Near the bamboo grove by the flowing stream,  
 The wind that enters the hollow stems  
 Produces a melody like the shepherd's flute...”*

— *Akananuru 82:1-2*

*“In the bamboo pierced by insects,  
 The early morning breeze flows,  
 Carrying the tune of a shepherd's reed flute...”*

— *Akananuru 225:5-8*

Nature itself becomes a teacher—offering sound, structure, and inspiration for musical instruments.

### Natural Soundscapes as Musical Orchestras

Poets often described how insects like bees and flies (*thumbi*, *sorumbu*) hum and buzz in flowers as though they are playing instruments:

*“The sweet tone of the Ambal flower's reed flute*

*Is rivaled by the hum of bees...*

— *Ainkurunuru 215:4*

*“Buzzing like a flute, the flies  
ather around the flowers at dawn...”*

— *Akananuru 245:16*

*“Like the stringed flute with silken notes,  
The flies hum upon blooming flowers...”*

— *Kalithogai 33:22–23*

These comparisons elevate even the most ordinary aspects of rural life into divine artistry.

## Conclusion

Music and musical instruments are intricately interwoven with the lives of the Sangam-era Tamils. Nature's events and sounds are not just poetic metaphors but serve as inspiration for the very invention of musical instruments and performance. Sangam poems show that

- Musical instruments were played with rhythm and sensitivity,
- Natural sounds were perceived with deep auditory awareness,
- Creatures, weather, and even terrain became instruments of emotion.

The ears of the ancient Tamils were attuned to every nuance in their environment. They did not merely hear sounds—they understood them, celebrated them, and mirrored them in music.

## Summary

From ancient times to the present day, natural sounds have played a significant role in human life, particularly in entertainment and the creation of music. In *Puram*-themed Sangam literature, music is frequently compared to elements of nature and the sounds of living beings. In *Akam*-themed poems, various natural sounds and appearances are compared to music and musical instruments.

Nature's entire auditory palette—whether wind, water, birds, insects, or animals—was conceptualized through the language of music. Natural sounds are often equated with *Palliyam*, a term that embodies the combined resonance of multiple instruments. The poetic development of *Palliyam* as a literary and artistic symbol is a distinct contribution of Sangam Tamils to cultural and musical heritage.

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