

Chapter 4

Songs of Monkeys: Representation of Macaques in Classical Tamil Poetry

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4.1 Introduction

Today, an Internet search for the keywords ‘monkeys’, ‘humans’ and ‘India’ typically yields accounts of growing numbers of rhesus macaques in the small towns and cities of northern India and the threats posed by these monkeys to human life and property. Such reports also describe how people venerate and feed the macaques due to religious sentiments but are increasingly expressing fear and anger over the presence of monkey populations in their neighbourhoods. Although many of these media communications are characteristically sensational, the antagonism against crop-raiding macaques and the cultural tolerance for their lives, which appear to go almost hand in hand, does add up to a rather remarkable scenario. The seeming dichotomy of reverence and revulsion that simultaneously mark human-macaque relations in India (and indeed, in many parts of Asia) has been commented upon by several authors (Knight 1999; Singh and Rao 2004; Saraswat 2010; Radhakrishna and Sinha 2011a, b). This gives rise to an interesting question: Have human-macaque interactions in India always been marked by these deeply polarised elements? Or is this reflective of more proximate causes? Investigating the history of our relations with animals may not always be functional, and yet, it does allow us to appreciate the magnitude of change that has occurred and perhaps learn from some of our old ways. In this chapter, I investigate cultural perspectives of animals as they are revealed through ancient writings; more specifically, I examine a body of classical Tamil literature from southern India to understand how interactions with primates, including macaques, were viewed by people in those ages.

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4.2 Humans and Animals

Michael Cook, in his stimulating commentary on an Islamic text written in 1326, raises an interesting premise: Monotheistic cultures have little space for animals, whereas polytheism is infinitely more accepting of them (Cook 1999). To support his stand, he compares the case of Islam and Hinduism, specifically with reference to the ways in which monkeys are treated in both religions. Most allusions to monkeys in Islam are contemptuous or, at the best, derisive of the nature of the animal. In contrast, the monkey is a powerful deity in Hinduism, synonymous with loyalty, strength of purpose and shrewdness. Hanuman, the monkey god of Hinduism, continues to be a prominent part of popular culture in many Asian nations, inspiring affection and reverence in equal measures (Wheatley and Harya Putra 1995; Lutgendorf 2007). A similar view is echoed by Ramanujan in his exposition on the different versions of the *Ramayana*, the classical South and Southeast Asian epic poem on the exploits of the great King Rama and his battle with and defeat of the demon King Ravana (Ramanujan 1992). In Valmiki's *Ramayana* (composed between second century BCE and second century CE and usually accepted as the earliest written version of the *Ramayana*), monkeys play a critical role in the ordering of events in the great epic, so much so, that it is difficult to imagine how the story would have proceeded without their presence. Yet, in the Jain rendering of the *Ramayana*, the *Paumacariya* (circa 2nd–4th CE) by Vimalasuri, monkeys are completely done away with. Instead, their part is played by the *vidyadharas*, celestial beings who are actually related to Ravana. The *vidyadharas* sport monkeys as emblems on their flags; this, the Jain retelling rationalises, is the reason why they were referred to as *vanaras* or monkeys (Ramanujan 1992).

Human societies have always coexisted with animals. The attribution of religious or symbolic significance to certain animals by some societies reflects how the humans therein perceived their place amongst other living species and 'the boundaries between man and beast' (Sterckx 2002). Classical writings about or relating to animals, irrespective of their intended roles as literature, political treatises or scientific discourses, act as rich sources of information about how the premodern world viewed human-animal relations. Such accounts may be from a naturalist viewpoint, zoological descriptions of animals that underline the exotic nature of the species, as seen in Strabo's *Geography* written around 18–24 CE:

Megasthenes says that the largest tigers are found among the Prasii, even nearly twice as large as lions, and so powerful that a tame one, though being led by four men, seized a mule by the hind leg and by force drew the mule to itself; and that the long-tailed apes are larger than the largest dogs, are white except for their faces, which are black (the contrary is the case elsewhere), that their tails are more than two cubits long, and that they are very tame and not malicious as regards attacks and thefts; and that stones are dug up the colour of frankincense and sweeter than figs or honey; and that in other places there are reptiles two cubits long with membranous wings like bats, and that they too fly by night, discharging drops of urine, or also of sweat, which putrefy the skin of anyone who is not on his guard; and that there are winged scorpions of surpassing size; and that ebony is also produced; and that there are also brave dogs, which do not let go the object bitten till water is poured down

into their nostrils; and that some bite so vehemently that their eyes become distorted and sometimes actually fall out; and that even a lion was held fast by a dog, and also a bull, and that the bull was actually killed, being overpowered through the dog's hold on his nose before he could be released.¹

Or they may reveal a preoccupation with the utilitarian function of animals, seen, for example, in ancient Chinese texts on animal husbandry, domestication and veterinary treatment (Sterckx 2005). Indian Vedic manuscripts (circa 1500 BCE–400 BCE) are exhaustive in the detail they provide regarding the suitability of certain classes of animals for ritual sacrifices or even for consumption (Smith 1991). References to animals may also be used as symbols or metaphors of 'wild' nature and human dominion over the less civilised aspects of the world. *Gilgamesh*, the Mesopotamian epic (circa 2700 BCE–1800 BCE, widely considered the oldest extant poetry known to the literary world), chronicles the adventures of Gilgamesh, great king of Uruk 'two-thirds divine and one-third human, extraordinary in strength and beauty', and his search for immortality (Kovacs 1985). But at the heart of the poem is the separation between civilised human nature and wild animal nature and the crisis brought about by this rift. The figure of Enkidu, initially more beast than man, later severed from his primal self and finally changed into an oppressor of nature, reflects humanity's need to identify with nature and the repercussions of denying this fundamental link (Barron 2002). The divide between man and animal is more explicit in Judaeo-Christian theology; in his paper, for example, Lynn White (1967) argues that much of early Christian writings emphasise dualism between man and nature and support man's exploitation of nature and animals for his own needs:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.²

Beast fables, such as the Buddhist *Jatakas*, Aesop's *Fables* and the *Panchatantra*, offer yet another perspective, wherein animal figures are used to convey lessons about human morality and ethics. These stories abound in lordly lions, wily jackals, meddlesome monkeys and foolish crocodiles through whose experiences the author counsels his human readers on the decorum and conduct of life (Pierce 1969). The framing story of the first book of the *Panchatantra* speaks of the amity between a lion and a bull and, through the narration of their broken friendship, inserts some 30 odd tales and sermons on prudent behaviour and the value of honesty and loyalty (Ryder 1925; Olivelle 1997). When the lion king confesses to his counsellor, the jackal, that his henchmen are too afraid to investigate the loud sounds that had frightened him, the jackal replies that they are not to be blamed, as servants take after their masters:

¹ *Geography*: Book XV, Chapter 1, Section 37. Downloaded from <http://penelope.uchicago.edu>.

² Genesis 1:26. The Bible (King James Version).

In case of horse or book or sword,
 Of woman, man or lute or word
 The use or uselessness depends
 On qualities the user lends.³

Elsewhere in the book, in the well-known story of *The Monkey and the Crocodile*, when the crocodile's wife demands that he must bring her the heart of the monkey who is his friend, the crocodile tries to refuse saying that the monkey is as dear as an adopted brother. Moreover, the monkey has been gifting them roseapples, so he must not be harmed. To convince his wife, he quotes the proverb:

To give us birth, we need a mother;
 For second birth we need another:
 And friendship's brother seems by far
 More dear than natural brothers are.⁴

The crocodile's wife is not convinced, however, and the rest of the story relates how the crocodile tries to procure the monkey's heart but is finally outwitted by the monkey.

Anthropomorphism is inevitably a large part of these animal representations. Ascribing human qualities to animals is an ancient practice, pervasive amongst all cultures and is, it has been argued, 'built-in to the human repertoire' (Carporel and Heyes 1997). The relation of anthropocentrism to anthropomorphism is a much-debated topic, and several scholars have investigated the subject at length to try and understand why we anthropomorphise (Bacon 1620/1960; Burghardt 1985; Fisher 1991; Kennedy 1992; Mitchell et al. 1997). Closely related to anthropomorphism (and of more interest to this chapter) is the less-discussed concept of zoomorphism. The converse of anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, refers to the assignment of animal characteristics to humans. Zoomorphism plays a significant role in shamanism and totemism; ritual activities allied to these belief systems involve animal relations, communing with animal spirits and transformation into animals (Baldick 2000; Layton 2000; Winkelman 2002, 2004). Indeed, some scholars hold that totemic thought envisages human groups and differences between them, in terms of different categories seen in the animal world (Levi-Strauss 1962, 1963).

4.3 Animal as Metaphor

Human societies have always used animal metaphors to express themselves. From palaeolithic rock paintings through ancient epics to modern novels, animal metaphors have been (and continue to be) used as exemplars to illustrate, substantiate

³ *The Panchatantra*: Book 1. Translated from the Sanskrit by A W Ryder. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

⁴ *The Panchatantra*: Book 4. Translated from the Sanskrit by A W Ryder. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

and sermonise (Barnett 1990). While anthropomorphism is prominent in such metaphorical usages in classical writings, zoomorphism, although perhaps less common, also occurs alongside. Virgil's *Aeneid* compares the play of Trojan children to dolphins gambolling in the sea:

so did the sons of Troy their courses weave
in mimic flights and battles fought for play,
like dolphins tumbling in the liquid waves,
along the Afric or Carpathian seas.⁵

and Turnus' anger to a bull that is readying for war (Briggs 1980):

Such frenzy goads him: his impassioned brow
is all on flame, the wild eyes flash with fire.
Thus, bellowing loud before the fearful fray,
some huge bull proves the fury of his horns,
pushing against a tree-trunk; his swift thrusts
would tear the winds in pieces; while his hoofs
toss up the turf and sand, rehearsing war.⁶

In Hellenistic writings, zoomorphism is more evident in the work of the Epicureans and the Cynics; Lucretius, in *De Rerum Natura*, consistently uses examples of animal behaviour to describe a standard that all humans must aspire to. But even when the position of the Cynic-Epicurean writer is avowedly pro-nature, animal descriptions are notably anthropomorphic: ants are 'fearful of coming age and penury', bees 'house together in one city' and an old horse 'rages idly'⁷ (Grant 1969; Gale 2000).

Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic descriptions are relatively more straightforward in classical Indian Sanskrit texts. With its multiplicity of birds and animals that sometimes are dramatis persona, Valmiki's *Ramayana* overflows in anthropomorphic descriptions, but zoomorphism is not far behind. Characters and their behaviours are repeatedly compared to animals, as, for example, Sita is 'fawn-eyed',⁸ Narada a 'bull among sages',⁹ Rama and Lakshmana 'splendid warriors with the gaze of lions, courageous and strong as lions, majestic, handsome, with the gait of fine bulls, with arms like elephants' trunks',¹⁰ while King Dasharatha caresses his

⁵ *Aeneid*: 5:592–595. Downloaded from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.

⁶ *Aeneid*: 12:100–106. Downloaded from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.

⁷ *Georgics* (1: 191; 4:155; 3:101) Downloaded from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>

⁸ *Valmiki Ramayana*. Kishkindha kanda: Sarga 1:16. From *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An epic of ancient India, Vol. IV: The Kishkindha kanda* (1994). Translated by Rosalind Lefebber, Edited by Robert Goldman. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

⁹ *Valmiki Ramayana*. Bala kanda: Sarga 1:1. From *The Ramayana of Valmik: An epic of ancient India, Volume 1: The Bala kanda* (1984). Translated and Edited by R.P. Goldman. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

¹⁰ *Valmiki Ramayana*. Kishkindha kanda: Sarga 3: 6–8. From *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An epic of ancient India, Vol. IV: The Kishkindha kanda* (1994). Translated by Rosalind Lefebber, Edited by Robert Goldman. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

distraught queen as ‘affectionately, as a great bull elephant in the wilderness might caress his cow wounded by the poisoned arrow of a hunter lurking in the forest’.¹¹

Why is zoomorphism less common than anthropomorphism in premodern literature? Cultural historians have hypothesised that the cultural history of Europe shows three distinct structural layers; the most well-known of these is the historically recent Muslim/Christian layer. This was preceded in prehistorical times by anthropomorphism, which, in turn, succeeded the archaic zoomorphic and totemic layer (Frobenius 1929; Viereck 2002). Each period lasted many thousands of years – Alinei (1997) theorises that anthropomorphism was typical of the Metal Age, while zoomorphism was more representative of the Stone Age. Most certainly, there were transitions and overlaps between the three periods but, inevitably, the cultural influences of the last two periods, at least on language, have been documented better (Viereck 2002). This perhaps may explain why, generally speaking, there are relatively more accounts of anthropomorphism than zoomorphism in premodern writings.

4.4 Classical Tamil Literature and Zoomorphism

Anthropomorphism and zoomorphism display remarkable knowledge of animals and keen interest in their behaviour, but zoomorphism is infinitely more detailed in its observation of ‘bestial’ qualities that it assigns to human beings (Doniger 2005). One body of classical literature where anthropomorphism is rare and zoomorphism predominates is classical Tamil poetry (Ramanujan 1985; Selby 2011).¹² Tamil is one of the classical languages of India and refers to the Dravidian language that is spoken mainly in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Tamil is also spoken in the nations of Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Fiji. Classical Tamil literature, or *Sangam* literature as it is popularly referred to, comprises Eight Anthologies of Verse (*Ettutokai*), Ten Long Poems (*Pattuppattu*) and a grammar composition, the *Tolkappiyam*. Written in Old Tamil (the precursor to modern Tamil) and composed largely between 100 BCE and 250 CE, these texts constitute some of the most original and sensuous poetry found in classical writings (Ramanujan 1967; Zvelebil 1973). The Eight Anthologies are *Narrinai*, *Kuruntokai*, *Ainkurunūru*, *Patirruppattu*, *Paripāṭal*, *Kalittokai*, *Akanānūru* and *Puranānūru*. *Sangam* poems are classified, on the basis of their themes, as *akam* (interior) and *puram* (exterior) poems. *Akam* poems are love poems, woven around

¹¹ *Valmiki Ramayana*. Ayodhya kanda: Sarga 10: 4. From *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India. Vol. II: The Ayodhya kanda* (1986). Translated by Sheldon Pollock, Edited by Robert Goldman. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

¹² Selby’s discussion on zoomorphism and the portrayal of animals in *Sangam* literature in the introductory section of her volume is particularly stimulating, and this chapter owes its genesis to many of the thoughts expressed therein.

the various experiences of love between a man and a woman, while *puram* poems are about action and public life and typically deal with heroic kings, great battles, valorous deeds and the community at large. *Narrinai*, *Kuruntokai*, *Ainkurunūru*, *Kalittokai* and *Akanānūru* are *akam* anthologies, while *Puṛaṇānūru*, *Patirruppattu* and *Paripāṭal* are *puram* anthologies (Ramanujan 1967, 1985; Hart 1999).

Sangam literature is, essentially, landscape poetry. Every poem is ascribed a *tinai* or landscape that designates the mood of the poem. *Akam* poems are represented by five kinds of landscapes – *mullai* (forest), *kurinci* (mountains), *marutam* (pastoral), *neytal* (sandy seashore) and *palai* (wasteland). Each landscape is associated with a particular aspect of love – *mullai* with patient waiting, *kurinci* with lover's union, *marutam* with lover's infidelity, *neytal* with anxiety and *palai* with separation – and may be evoked by one or more elements characteristic of the landscape, such as a specific time, season, bird, animal, plant and occupation (Ramanujan 1967; Selby 2011). *Puram tinai* are named for situations such as prelude to war (*vetci*), beginning of invasion (*vanci*), siege (*ulinai*), battle (*tumpai*), victory (*vakai*), endurance (*kanci*) and elegy (*patan*); scholars, however, agree that, unlike the *akam* poems, correspondences between the landscape and the elements of the poem are not always clear in *puram* poems (Ramanujan 1985; Hart 1999).

4.5 Bards and Monkeys

Birds and animals are important components of the landscape in *akam* poems. Particular species symbolise certain landscapes, for example, the monkey, elephant, horse and bull typify the *kurinci* landscape, while the crocodile and shark identify the *neytal* landscape. However, 'birds and beasts of one landscape' are sometimes permitted to appear in other landscapes (Ramanujan 1967, 1985). Apart from the sophistication of the poetics, *Sangam* poems are also a historical record of people's knowledge and perceptions of animals and plants thousands of years ago and, for this reason, offer a fascinating field of investigation for naturalists and students of animal behaviour. Scholars who have examined the treatment of nature in *Sangam* poetry attest that details regarding plants and animals are portrayed with amazing accuracy in the texts (Varadarajan 1957; Thani Nayagam 1966). Imagery involving plants and animals are built on their natural properties, so that 'the real world (is) always kept in sight and included in the symbolic' (Ramanujan 1985).

What does classical Tamil poetry tell us about macaques, the focus of this volume? Quite a bit, as it turns out. Monkeys, along with boars, tigers and elephants, are popular entities in *akam* poems. In fact, the *Ainkurunuru* has a whole section devoted to monkeys called *Kurakku-p-pattu*, or Ten Poems on the Monkey (Selby 2011). In this segment, the poet uses the figure of a male monkey to refer to the hero and his behaviour, which is sometimes less than desired. The ten poems traverse the circumstances of the hero's love for the heroine, their attempts to meet clandestinely, the heroine's anxious wait for her lover and finally, their elopement

and marriage (Selby 2011). Given below are a few selections from three of the poems:

In his land,
a foolish, strong monkey,
the young of a black-fingered female,
disturbs a comb full of sweet honey
on the treacherous mountain,
then springs onto a nearby branch,
long and unsteady.¹³

In his country,
the mate of the female monkey,
a fool of a male,
scampers up the rising slope of the hill
at the roaring of the mighty tigress¹⁴

In your country,
the lover of the female monkey,
that male who grazes on shoots,
takes up a cool, fragrant creeper
and slashes at young clouds
foaming over broad slabs of rock¹⁵

As the lines depict, the monkey epitomises the hero, who may be strong but is inept at stealing the ‘sweet honey’, caring yet thoughtless of his lover’s feelings and playful but forgetful of her pain during his long absences (Selby 2011). The animal imagery used lends a tone of light-heartedness to the segment; although the heroine’s friend chides the hero for his inconsideration and the heroine is saddened by his neglect, there is no real sense of misery or woe. In contrast, in *Kelar-pattu*, or Ten Poems on the Boar, where the boar is used to refer to the hero and his actions, the mood evoked is one of disquiet:

In his country,
a brave boar,
gorging on tender millet,
sleeps on a slope
strewn with hard stones.¹⁶

In his hilly country,
an enraged male boar
with tiny eyes
diverts the archers
near the plinth

¹³Ainkurunuru 272. From *Tamil Love poetry: The five hundred short poems of the Ainkurunuru* (2011). Translated by M.A Selby. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁴Ainkurunuru 274. From *Tamil Love poetry: The five hundred short poems of the Ainkurunuru* (2011). Translated by M.A Selby. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁵Ainkurunuru 276. From *Tamil Love poetry: The five hundred short poems of the Ainkurunuru* (2011). Translated by M.A Selby. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁶Ainkurunuru 261. From *Tamil Love poetry: The five hundred short poems of the Ainkurunuru* (2011). Translated by M.A Selby. New York: Columbia University Press.

on the slopes
then steals the paddy.¹⁷

The boar may be more stately and adept than the monkey, but he is untrustworthy in a way that the monkey is not. In the world of Sangam poetry, animals and ‘people of low culture’ only possess the five senses of touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing. As they lack the sixth sense of the mind, they cannot be expected to honour or cherish the higher values of life. Hence, when human characters behave thoughtlessly, their behaviour suggests parallels in the animal world (Ramanujan 1985; Selby 2011). It is notable that the Sangam poets had very specific views about the particular qualities of various animals. The monkey and the boar very clearly symbolise different sets of attributes, and as the poetry fragments below demonstrate, the monkey is consistently depicted as a denizen of the forests, daring, curious, greedy, mischievous and easily distracted:

that girl with the hair
that can't yet be tied in a knot
has crossed over those tangled wastes
unknown even to monkeys.¹⁸

And the bandits, men who steal like monkeys,
fierce and greedy and spread throughout
the coolness of the mountain dense with trees,
they are one more enemy, oblivious to our state¹⁹

Excited by such teeming voices,
an audience of female monkeys
watches in wonder
the peacock in the bamboo hill²⁰

He is from those mountains
where the little black-faced monkey,
playing in the sun,
rolls the wild peacock's eggs
on the rocks.²¹

Frodsham (1967), in his comparative account of landscape poetry in Europe and China, casually, and most memorably, dismisses Sangam poetry for its ‘limited appreciation of nature’. It may be useful to reflect on Frodsham’s criticism in order

¹⁷ *Ainkurunuru* 267. From *Tamil Love poetry: The five hundred short poems of the Ainkurunuru* (2011). Translated by M.A Selby. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁸ *Ainkurunuru* 374. From *Tamil Love poetry: The five hundred short poems of the Ainkurunuru* (2011). Translated by M.A Selby. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁹ *Purananuru* 136. From *The Purananuru: Four hundred songs of war and wisdom* (1999). Translated and edited by G. L. Hart and H. Heifetz. New York: Columbia University Press.

²⁰ *Akananuru* 82. From *Poems of Love and War: From the eight anthologies and the ten long poems of classical Tamil* (1985). Translated by A.K. Ramanujan. New York: Columbia University Press.

²¹ *Kuruntokai* 38. From *Poems of Love and War: From the eight anthologies and the ten long poems of classical Tamil* (1985). Translated by A.K. Ramanujan. New York: Columbia University Press.

to analyse the usage of nature in Sangam poetry. Classical Tamil poetry does not display the mystical fascination for wild nature that is seen in early Chinese and English literature, which Frodsham defines as true landscape poetry. Instead, nature is part of the human landscape here. Animals, birds and plants are part of the human experience; they add to it, embody it and further refine it. In Ramanujan's (1985) words, 'mere nature description or imagism in poetry would be uninteresting to classical Tamil poets and critics, for it would not "signify"; it would be a signifier without a signified, a landscape (*mutal* and *karu*) without an *uri*, an appropriate human mood'.

Of more interest to the biologist is, of course, another set of concerns: What is the species identity of the monkey described in Sangam literature? Are they accurate representations of the species? Do the poems add anything to our corpus of knowledge about the species? Four species of anthropoid primates are found in southern India – the bonnet macaque *Macaca radiata*, lion-tailed macaque *Macaca silenus*, Hanuman langur *Semnopithecus entellus* and the Nilgiri langur *Trachypithecus johnii*. (Southern India is also home to a fifth primate species, the nocturnal prosimian slender loris *Loris tardigradus*, but for obvious reasons, this species is not part of the discussion here.) The bonnet macaque and the Hanuman langur are distributed across entire peninsular India while the lion-tailed macaque and the Nilgiri langur are restricted to the wet forests of the Western Ghats mountain range (Fig. 4.1). How does the distributional range of the four primate species map onto the geographical world of the Sangam poets?

'Tamilakam' or the Land of Tamils is described in Sangam poetry as a collection of small chiefdoms in southern India dominated by the three kingdoms of Pandyas, Cheras and Cholas (Sastri 1955; Champakalakshmi 1987; Selby and Peterson 2008). Three major river valleys were the loci around which these kingdoms flourished – the Pandyas in the Vaigai and Tamaraparani river valleys, the Cheras in the Periyar river valley and the Cholas around the lower Kaveri river basin (Stein 1977; Champakalakshmi 1987). Hence, significant parts of the distribution ranges of the bonnet macaque, lion-tailed macaque, Hanuman langur and Nilgiri langur must have been within the geographical boundaries of the region known to the Sangam poets (Fig. 4.1). The poems use several terms for monkeys: *ukam*, *mandhi*, *kaduvan*, *kalai*, *musu* and *kurangu*. *Kurangu* and *ukam* are generic terms for a monkey, while *mandhi* means a female monkey and *kalai*, *kaduvan* and *musu* refer to a male monkey. The word *parpu* is used to mean the infants of animals; when used in the context of a monkey description, it refers specifically to an infant monkey.²² Although no specific terms are used for different kinds of monkeys, some of the poems describe a red-faced monkey and a black-faced monkey:

Lord of a mountain where the slopes rise so high that the summit
cannot be touched by the clouds and a male monkey with black fingers

²² See <http://sangampoemsinenglish.wordpress.com/nature-in-sangam-tamil/> and <http://animalsin-sangamtamil.wordpress.com> for information on classical Tamil terms for various animals and birds and a list of Sangam Tamil poems that involve animal and bird descriptions.



Fig. 4.1 Map of southern India depicting the Eastern and Western Ghats mountain ranges and the main rivers

plucks and eats fruit from a green-leafed jackfruit tree towering upon that mountain, handsome with his red-faced mate, a sight glowing into the distances and then he settles to sleep at the top of a bamboo!²³

Like a male black-faced monkey who looks as if he's wearing face paint, crashing through the forest grabbing wildly at the branches because he can't tell which can support his weight²⁴

²³ *Purananuru* 200. From *The Purananuru: Four hundred songs of war and wisdom* (1999). Translated and edited by G. L. Hart and H. Heifetz. New York: Columbia University Press.

²⁴ *Kuruntokai* 121. From *Kuruntogai* (2010). Translated by R Butler. Ebook.

While ‘red-faced’ certainly refers to the bonnet macaque (sexually cycling, lactating and some old female bonnet macaques acquire a characteristic red face; Sinha 2001), black-faced could refer to any of the other three primate species, the lion-tailed macaque, Nilgiri langur and Hanuman langur. However, the particulars of the description in the above lines, ‘who looks as if he’s wearing face paint’, lead one to infer that the poet is talking about the Hanuman langur. Most of the poems do not carry such descriptors though; it would appear that the Sangam poets, except for noting the morphological variation, did not really distinguish between the different monkey species. The generalities of monkey behaviour are infinitely of greater interest to them; even the simplest image is created with a wealth of detail that says much for their observations of animal life:

It would be so good,
if only there were someone to hear
your complaint,
and hold you tenderly
like a young monkey
holds onto her mother²⁵

when the clouds rumble
and the rain falls in sheets
a male monkey
his coat dense and bristling
reaches for a ripe jack-fruit
with its intense flower-like perfume
and sends it splashing down²⁶

that male monkey
roaming the hillside
with his sturdy young son -
showing his red mouth
and thorn-like fangs
as he eats the ripe mango fruits²⁷

A refrain that is associated with many of the monkey allusions refer to the monkey’s fondness for jackfruit (*Akananuru* 2; *Kuruntokai* 90, 153; *Natrinai* 373; *Purananuru* 128, 200). One of the verses in *Kuruntokai* (342) even talks about how men need tie nets around jackfruit trees to protect the ripe fruits from the marauding monkeys. The image of the monkey as an opportunistic crop raider is reinforced in *Kuruntokai* 335, where monkeys grab the grain, left drying on the rocks, when no one is watching:

where girls wear fine jewellery
with bangles stacked upon their arms
spread red millet over the flat boulders,
which green-eyed female monkeys
with their young

²⁵ *Kuruntokai* 29. From *Kuruntokai: An anthology of classical Tamil love poetry (1976)*. Translated by M. Shanmugam Pillai and David E. Ludden. Madurai: Koodal Publishers.

²⁶ *Kuruntokai* 90. From *Kuruntogai* (2010). Translated by R Butler. Ebook.

²⁷ *Kuruntokai* 26. From *Kuruntogai* (2010). Translated by R Butler. Ebook.

grab and run off with,
 jumping down from the branches
 picking a time
 when the girls are splashing in the tank
 and paying no attention to it.²⁸

Although the Sangam poets were not interested in identifying the primate species they talked about, several points argue that it is indeed the bonnet macaque that they were most familiar with. For one, most of the poems (*Ainkurunuru* 272, 279; *Kuruntokai* 26; *Purananuru* 116) talk about leaping, playing monkeys, a description that sits better on the rambunctious macaques than the stately langurs. The first verse of *Kurakku-p-pattu* in *Ainkurunuru* (271) talks of how when the female monkey eats *avarai* beans, her cheeks resemble the full bags of merchants²⁹ – a graphic simile that immediately evokes an image of the stuffed cheek-pouches of bonnet macaques. Then there is the striking account of a performing monkey infant, ‘fig-coloured’ and ‘red-faced’ that balances on a high rope, watched by *kuravar* children (*Natrinai* 95).³⁰ The description is clearly that of a bonnet macaque; more interesting, even today, the *kuravars*, a nomadic tribe known for their interest in hunting and trapping wild animals, use bonnet macaques as performing pets in Tamil Nadu (Meshack and Griffin 2002; Peterson 2008). The portrayal of the bonnet macaque as a pet recurs in *Natrinai* 353; here, the ‘the playful daughter’ of the *kuravan* is said to be ‘feeding jackfruit to a black-fingered monkey’.³¹ Most striking, perhaps, are depictions of the monkey living close to human settlements and found even in the backyard of one’s house, evidence that even 2,000 years ago, the bonnet macaque was behaving in a very weed macaque-like fashion:

Once: if an owl hooted on the hill,
 if a male ape leaped and loped
 out there on the jackfruit bough in our yard
 my poor heart would melt for fear.³²

Macaques are inquisitive, troublesome, grasping and lively in Sangam poetry, but quite remarkably, they are not holy or godly. The deification of monkeys was a much later process, expressed most decidedly in the form of righteous Hanuman in *Iramavatharam*, or the Tamil *Ramayana* (circa 9–12 CE) by the poet Kamban. In the Sangam landscape, macaques are just there, much like Mallory’s Mount Everest,

²⁸ *Kuruntokai* 335. From *Kuruntogai* (2010). Translated by R Butler. Ebook.

²⁹ See <https://animalsinsangamtamil.wordpress.com> for this translation. For an alternate translation of the same verse, see Selby (2011): “a female monkey...her stomach swelling/like a peddler’s sack”. A strictly literal translation of the original verse would be “the female monkey appears like ...”.

³⁰ <https://animalsinsangamtamil.wordpress.com>.

³¹ *Natrinai* 353. From *Love Stands Alone: Selections from Tamil Sangam poetry* (2010). Translated by M.L. Thangappa. Edited by A.R. Venkatachalapathy. New Delhi: Viking Penguin.

³² *Kuruntokai* 153. From *The Interior Landscape: Love poems from a classical Tamil anthology* (1967). Translated by A.K. Ramanujan. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

and it is indeed a pity that we have come so far that we can no longer empathise with the equanimity of the poet Mutamociyar when he sang of the monkey in the town's commons³³:

When the ape
 on the bough
 of the jackfruit tree
 in the town's commons
 mistakes for fruit
 the eye
 on the thonged drumheads
 hung up there by mendicant bards,
 he taps on it,³⁴

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³³ *Purananuru* 128. From *Poems of Love and War: From the eight anthologies and the ten long poems of classical Tamil* (1985). Translated by A.K. Ramanujan. New York: Columbia University Press.

³⁴ This verse was, in many ways, my real introduction to the world of classical Tamil poetry, and I am indebted to Anindya Sinha for awakening me to this thing of beauty.

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