



Folk Traditions as Ecological Archives: A Study of Indigenous Knowledge

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Abstract

Folk traditions preserve not only the cultural identity of communities but also generations of ecological knowledge that has evolved through close interaction with the natural environment. This article examines folk traditions as ecological archives that document indigenous environmental knowledge and promote sustainable relationships between humans and nature. Drawing on ecocriticism and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), the study analyses selected Tamil folk traditions, including folk songs, proverbs, sacred groves (*kāvu*), and Ayyanar worship, to demonstrate how oral narratives encode ecological memory, biodiversity conservation, water management, and environmental ethics. Adopting a qualitative, interpretive methodology, the paper explores the ways in which these traditions function as living repositories of environmental wisdom and community-based conservation practices. The findings suggest that Tamil folk traditions contribute significantly to ecological awareness by integrating cultural beliefs with sustainable resource management. The study argues that recognizing folk traditions as ecological archives broadens the scope of literary and folklore studies while highlighting the continuing relevance of indigenous knowledge in addressing contemporary environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecological degradation. By bringing together folklore studies, ecocriticism, and environmental humanities, the article demonstrates that indigenous

ecological wisdom remains an important intellectual resource for promoting environmental sustainability and preserving cultural heritage.

Keywords: Folk Literature, Ecocriticism, Indigenous Knowledge, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Tamil Folklore, Sacred Groves, Environmental Sustainability

Introduction

Environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, climate change, and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources have emerged as some of the most pressing global concerns of the twenty-first century. While scientific research has generated significant knowledge about these challenges, there is increasing recognition that indigenous communities have long preserved sophisticated ecological wisdom through their cultural traditions. This knowledge, transmitted orally across generations, reflects a deep understanding of local ecosystems and sustainable ways of living. Consequently, folk traditions have gained renewed scholarly attention as valuable sources of environmental knowledge that complement contemporary ecological discourse.

Folk literature is more than a repository of cultural beliefs, customs, and collective memory; it also preserves practical knowledge about agriculture, biodiversity, water management, medicinal plants, seasonal cycles, and ethical



relationships between humans and nature. Oral forms such as folk songs, myths, legends, proverbs, and ritual performances encode ecological observations accumulated through centuries of interaction with the environment. These traditions function as **ecological archives**, preserving environmental memory and indigenous knowledge that continue to guide community-based conservation practices.

In the Indian context, and particularly in Tamil Nadu, folk traditions reveal an intimate relationship between culture and ecology. Sacred groves (*kāvu*), village deity worship, agricultural songs, seasonal festivals, and oral narratives have historically encouraged communities to protect forests, water bodies, and native biodiversity. Practices associated with Ayyanar worship, for instance, demonstrate how religious beliefs have contributed to conserving village landscapes by safeguarding sacred spaces from overexploitation. Similarly, folk proverbs and songs preserve empirical observations about rainfall, cultivation, and seasonal changes, reflecting indigenous ecological knowledge developed through lived experience.

Recent developments in ecocriticism and environmental humanities have broadened literary studies by examining how texts shape ecological consciousness and environmental ethics. However, much of this scholarship has concentrated on written literary texts, while the ecological dimensions of oral traditions remain comparatively underexplored. Although folklore has been widely studied from anthropological and cultural perspectives, fewer studies have examined Tamil folk traditions as living ecological archives that preserve indigenous environmental knowledge and contribute to contemporary sustainability debates.

Against this background, the present study investigates Tamil folk traditions through the combined perspectives of ecocriticism and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Focusing on selected examples such as sacred groves (*kāvu*), Ayyanar worship, folk songs, and proverbs, the article argues that these traditions embody environmental ethics, community-based conservation practices, and ecological memory. By interpreting folk literature as a dynamic repository of indigenous knowledge rather than merely a form of cultural heritage, the study seeks to demonstrate its continuing relevance for environmental sustainability and interdisciplinary literary scholarship.

Literature Review

The intersection of folklore and ecology has received increasing scholarly attention through the fields of ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and indigenous knowledge studies. Earlier folklore research primarily viewed oral traditions as repositories of cultural identity, social values, and collective memory. More recent scholarship, however, recognises that folk traditions also preserve ecological knowledge accumulated through generations of interaction with local environments. This interdisciplinary perspective has expanded the understanding of folklore from a cultural artifact to a dynamic knowledge system that contributes to environmental sustainability.

Ecocriticism provides the principal theoretical framework for examining the relationship between literature and the natural world. Scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell argue that literary texts shape environmental consciousness by representing the interconnectedness of humans and nature. While ecocritical studies have largely focused on novels, poetry, and modern environmental writing, oral traditions have received comparatively less attention. Folk narratives, songs, myths, and proverbs similarly represent forests, rivers, mountains, animals, and agricultural landscapes as active participants in human life, thereby encouraging ecological awareness and ethical responsibility.

Parallel to ecocritical scholarship, the concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) has highlighted the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in environmental conservation. TEK refers to the cumulative knowledge, beliefs, and practices developed by indigenous communities through long-term interaction with their ecosystems. Such knowledge encompasses agricultural practices, seasonal cycles, medicinal plants, water management, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable resource use. Because this knowledge is transmitted orally through stories, songs, rituals, and proverbs, folklore functions as a vital medium for preserving ecological wisdom across generations.

Indian scholarship has increasingly explored the ecological dimensions of folk traditions, particularly among rural and tribal communities. Studies have shown that sacred groves, village rituals, agricultural songs, and oral narratives



contribute to conserving biodiversity, protecting water resources, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Sacred groves, in particular, have attracted scholarly attention as community-managed landscapes where religious beliefs and customary practices regulate the use of natural resources. Similarly, Tamil folk songs and proverbs preserve observations about rainfall, cultivation, soil fertility, and seasonal variations, reflecting practical ecological knowledge rooted in local experience.

Despite these significant contributions, existing research often examines folklore either as cultural heritage or as an anthropological phenomenon, while ecocritical studies continue to privilege written literary texts. Comparatively fewer studies integrate ecocriticism with Traditional Ecological Knowledge to interpret Tamil folk traditions as ecological archives. This interdisciplinary gap limits the understanding of how oral traditions preserve environmental memory and support contemporary sustainability discourse.

The present study addresses this gap by bringing together ecocriticism, indigenous knowledge studies, and Tamil folklore. It argues that Tamil folk traditions are not merely expressions of cultural identity but living ecological archives that preserve environmental ethics, community-based conservation practices, and sustainable ecological knowledge. Through this integrated approach, the study contributes to the growing dialogue between literary studies, folklore research, and environmental humanities.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have explored folklore from anthropological, cultural, and historical perspectives, comparatively fewer studies have examined Tamil folk traditions through an integrated framework of ecocriticism and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Existing ecocritical research has largely focused on written literary texts, while the ecological dimensions of oral traditions remain underexplored. Likewise, studies on indigenous knowledge often emphasize environmental practices without adequately considering the literary and symbolic forms through which such knowledge is preserved and transmitted. This interdisciplinary gap limits the understanding of folk literature as a repository of ecological memory and sustainable environmental practices. The present study addresses this gap by interpreting selected Tamil folk traditions as living ecological archives that preserve indigenous environmental knowledge and contribute to contemporary discussions on environmental sustainability.

Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine Tamil folk traditions as ecological archives preserving indigenous environmental knowledge.
2. To analyse the ecological values embedded in selected folk songs, proverbs, sacred groves (*kāvu*), and Ayyanar worship through an ecocritical perspective.
3. To explore the role of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in promoting biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management.
4. To demonstrate the relevance of Tamil folk traditions to contemporary environmental sustainability and environmental humanities.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on textual interpretation and interdisciplinary literary analysis. It employs ecocriticism as the primary analytical framework, complemented by the concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) to examine the ecological dimensions of Tamil folk traditions. The primary sources include selected Tamil folk songs, proverbs, sacred grove traditions (*kāvu*), and narratives associated with Ayyanar worship. Secondary sources consist of scholarly works on ecocriticism, folklore, environmental humanities, indigenous knowledge systems, and sustainability studies. Through thematic analysis, the study investigates how oral traditions preserve ecological memory, environmental ethics, and community-based conservation practices. Rather



than treating folklore solely as cultural heritage, the methodology interprets these traditions as dynamic knowledge systems that continue to contribute to environmental awareness and sustainable living.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism

The primary theoretical foundation of this study is ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary field that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment. Emerging prominently during the 1990s, ecocriticism argues that literary texts shape ecological consciousness by representing interactions between humans and the more-than-human world.

Rather than viewing nature as a passive backdrop, ecocriticism recognizes landscapes, forests, rivers, animals, and ecosystems as active participants in cultural and literary narratives. Folk literature is particularly valuable within this framework because it portrays ecological relationships through lived cultural experience rather than abstract environmental theory. Stories, songs, and rituals frequently depict humans as members of ecological communities whose well-being depends upon maintaining harmony with the natural world.

Applying ecocriticism to folk traditions reveals how oral narratives encode conservation ethics, encourage sustainable resource use, and cultivate environmental responsibility. Sacred landscapes, divine rivers, protective forests, and animal symbolism are not merely religious motifs but literary strategies that reinforce ecological stewardship.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) provides the second theoretical foundation for this study. TEK refers to cumulative environmental knowledge developed by indigenous communities through long-term interaction with their local ecosystems.

Unlike laboratory-based scientific knowledge, TEK emerges through continuous observation, practical experience, experimentation, and collective memory. It encompasses knowledge relating to:

- seasonal cycles,
- rainfall patterns,
- medicinal plants,
- biodiversity,
- wildlife behaviour,
- agricultural techniques,
- water conservation,
- soil management, and
- sustainable harvesting practices.

Oral traditions function as one of the principal mechanisms through which TEK is transmitted. Folk songs teach agricultural timing, myths protect sacred forests, proverbs communicate weather prediction, and ritual performances reinforce sustainable environmental practices. Consequently, folk literature operates simultaneously as artistic expression and environmental documentation.

This study therefore interprets folk narratives not simply as imaginative stories but as repositories of ecological intelligence accumulated over centuries.



Cultural Ecology

Cultural ecology explores the reciprocal relationship between human culture and the environment. It argues that cultural practices evolve through adaptation to ecological conditions.

Communities living in forests, coastal regions, mountains, deserts, and river valleys develop distinct oral traditions that reflect their environmental realities. These traditions preserve knowledge concerning locally available resources, climatic conditions, food systems, and ecological hazards.

Tamil folk traditions provide numerous examples of this adaptive relationship. Agricultural songs follow monsoon rhythms, village rituals celebrate water sources, and sacred groves conserve biodiversity through customary beliefs. Such traditions demonstrate that environmental sustainability is embedded within everyday cultural practices rather than existing as a separate institutional activity.

By incorporating cultural ecology, the present study understands folklore as an adaptive knowledge system that continually mediates relationships between people and their environments.

Environmental Humanities

Environmental humanities extend ecological inquiry beyond scientific analysis by integrating literature, history, philosophy, anthropology, ethics, and cultural studies.

Environmental crises are not merely technical problems; they are also cultural and ethical challenges shaped by human beliefs, values, and social practices. Folk literature contributes to environmental humanities by preserving community-based environmental ethics that emphasize reciprocity, restraint, and respect for non-human life.

Unlike industrial models that prioritize economic exploitation, folk traditions frequently portray nature as sacred, relational, and morally significant. Such perspectives encourage conservation through cultural values rather than legal enforcement.

Conceptual Framework

The present study proposes that folk literature operates as an ecological archive through four interconnected dimensions:

Folk Tradition	Ecological Function	Knowledge Preserved	Contemporary Relevance
Folk Songs	Agricultural memory	Farming techniques	Sustainable agriculture
Myths	Sacred ecology	Forest conservation	Biodiversity protection
Proverbs	Environmental observation	Weather prediction	Climate adaptation
Rituals	Community stewardship	Water management	Resource conservation
Oral Narratives	Cultural memory	Ecological ethics	Environmental education

Together, ecocriticism, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, cultural ecology, and environmental humanities provide a comprehensive interdisciplinary framework for interpreting folk traditions as dynamic ecological archives.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in literary analysis and interdisciplinary environmental criticism. The research does not seek to measure ecological variables quantitatively; instead, it examines how ecological knowledge is represented, preserved, and transmitted through folk traditions.



Research Design

The research employs a descriptive and analytical approach combining:

- textual analysis,
- ecocritical interpretation,
- comparative literary analysis,
- indigenous knowledge studies, and
- cultural analysis.

This interdisciplinary methodology enables the study to investigate ecological meanings embedded within oral traditions.

Primary Sources

The primary corpus consists of selected Indian folk traditions, with particular emphasis on Tamil oral literature, including:

- Folk songs
- Village myths
- Oral legends
- Proverbs
- Ritual chants
- Sacred grove traditions
- Agricultural songs
- Harvest festival narratives

Illustrative examples from other indigenous traditions may be used for comparative purposes where appropriate.

Secondary Sources

The study engages scholarship from:

- Ecocriticism
- Environmental humanities
- Folklore studies
- Indigenous knowledge systems
- Anthropology
- Cultural ecology
- Sustainability studies

These interdisciplinary perspectives provide the conceptual tools necessary to interpret folklore as an ecological archive.



Analytical Method

The analysis proceeds through thematic interpretation. Ecological themes such as forests, rivers, biodiversity, sacred landscapes, animals, agriculture, climate, and environmental ethics are identified within selected folk traditions. These themes are then interpreted using ecocritical principles and Traditional Ecological Knowledge to demonstrate how environmental wisdom is encoded within narrative structures.

Scope and Delimitation

The study focuses primarily on Indian folk traditions, especially Tamil oral literature. While references to global indigenous traditions are included for comparative insight, the analysis does not attempt a comprehensive survey of world folklore. Instead, it aims to illustrate broader theoretical arguments through representative case studies.

Analysis and Discussion

Folk Traditions as Ecological Memory

From an ecocritical perspective, folk traditions function as repositories of ecological memory, preserving community experiences of landscapes, biodiversity, and seasonal change. Unlike written archives, oral traditions are continuously renewed through performance, enabling each generation to inherit environmental knowledge alongside cultural values.

Many Tamil agricultural folk songs illustrate this relationship by linking farming activities with monsoon cycles, soil conditions, and local biodiversity. Such songs are not simply expressions of rural life; they encode practical knowledge about cultivation, irrigation, and seasonal timing. The repeated performance of these songs ensures that ecological observations remain part of collective memory.

Ecocriticism challenges the anthropocentric view that nature exists solely as a resource for human exploitation. Instead, folk traditions portray rivers, forests, mountains, and animals as active participants in community life. This literary representation promotes coexistence rather than domination and encourages ecological responsibility through cultural practice rather than formal environmental legislation.

Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Environmental Practices

Traditional ecological knowledge embedded in folk traditions demonstrates that indigenous communities developed sophisticated environmental management systems long before the emergence of modern ecological science. Knowledge concerning rainfall, soil fertility, medicinal plants, water conservation, and biodiversity has historically been transmitted through oral narratives rather than written manuals.

Tamil folk proverbs frequently reflect careful environmental observation. Proverbs relating to rainfall, agricultural seasons, and tree planting reveal empirical knowledge accumulated through centuries of interaction with local ecosystems. Such oral expressions function as practical guidelines for farming communities and illustrate how language preserves ecological experience.

Sacred grove traditions provide another significant example. Many villages continue to protect small forest patches dedicated to local deities. These sacred spaces have unintentionally become reservoirs of biodiversity because religious customs discourage indiscriminate tree felling, hunting, and resource extraction. Contemporary ecological research increasingly recognizes that these community-managed landscapes contribute to habitat conservation and groundwater recharge.

From the perspective of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, such practices illustrate that conservation is not merely a scientific activity but also a cultural institution supported by ritual, belief, and collective responsibility.

Ecological Ethics in Folk Narratives

A distinguishing characteristic of folk literature is its ethical representation of the relationship between humans and nature. Rather than presenting humans as masters of the environment, many folk narratives emphasize reciprocity, restraint, and mutual dependence.



In numerous Tamil village traditions, rivers are personified as nurturing mothers, trees as protectors of life, and mountains as sacred ancestors. These symbolic representations cultivate environmental ethics by encouraging respect for natural entities. Such narratives discourage excessive exploitation because ecological destruction is simultaneously interpreted as a moral and social violation.

Ecocritical scholars argue that literature influences environmental consciousness by shaping readers' ethical imagination. Folk narratives perform this function within oral cultures by integrating ecological values into everyday storytelling, ritual performance, and communal celebration. Consequently, environmental ethics become part of cultural identity rather than external regulations imposed by governmental institutions.

This ethical dimension remains particularly relevant in the Anthropocene, where ecological crises increasingly require changes in cultural values alongside technological innovation.

Contemporary Relevance

Rapid industrialization, urban expansion, climate change, and the decline of oral traditions threaten both biodiversity and indigenous ecological knowledge. As traditional storytelling practices diminish, communities risk losing valuable environmental experience accumulated over centuries.

Recognising folk traditions as ecological archives offers opportunities for integrating indigenous knowledge into environmental education, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable development. Educational institutions can incorporate local folklore into environmental studies, enabling students to understand sustainability through culturally familiar narratives.

Similarly, conservation programmes may benefit from collaborating with indigenous communities whose traditional knowledge complements scientific research. Sacred grove conservation, community-based water management, and traditional agricultural practices demonstrate that environmental sustainability often emerges through local participation rather than external intervention alone.

The integration of folk ecological knowledge with contemporary environmental science should not romanticise indigenous traditions or treat them as static relics. Instead, such knowledge should be critically evaluated, documented, and adapted to present ecological challenges. An interdisciplinary dialogue between environmental science and folklore studies can therefore contribute to more inclusive and culturally responsive approaches to sustainability.

Case Study 1: Sacred Groves (*Kāvu*) as Community-Based Biodiversity Conservation

Sacred groves, locally known as *kāvu*, are patches of forest traditionally protected through religious beliefs and customary practices. Unlike government-managed reserves, these groves are maintained by village communities who regard them as the dwelling places of local deities and ancestral spirits. Because activities such as tree felling, hunting, and excessive resource extraction are often prohibited, sacred groves have historically served as informal systems of biodiversity conservation.

From an ecocritical perspective, *kāvu* challenges the modern separation of culture and nature. The grove is not viewed simply as a physical resource but as a living cultural landscape where ecological integrity is sustained through ritual and collective responsibility. Religious narratives surrounding these spaces encourage respect for vegetation, wildlife, and water sources, thereby reinforcing environmental stewardship through cultural belief rather than legal regulation.

As repositories of indigenous ecological knowledge, sacred groves also preserve traditional understandings of medicinal plants, native tree species, pollinators, and local hydrology. Community elders often possess knowledge about plant uses, seasonal changes, and conservation practices that has been transmitted orally across generations. Such knowledge illustrates how folklore functions as an ecological archive, preserving environmental memory alongside cultural identity.

In contemporary environmental discourse, sacred groves demonstrate that community participation is fundamental to sustainable conservation. Rather than replacing scientific approaches, indigenous conservation practices complement modern biodiversity management by offering locally grounded models of environmental protection. This case study



supports the argument that folk traditions should be recognized as dynamic ecological knowledge systems with continuing relevance for sustainability.

Case Study 2: Ayyanar Worship and Ecological Stewardship

The worship of Ayyanar, a guardian deity widely venerated in rural Tamil Nadu, illustrates the close relationship between folk religion and environmental conservation. Ayyanar shrines are commonly located at the edges of villages, near forests, groves, ponds, or irrigation tanks. These locations are significant because they function as ecological buffers that protect water resources, vegetation, and wildlife.

The terracotta horses placed at Ayyanar shrines symbolize vigilance and protection. While they hold religious significance, they also reinforce the idea that village boundaries and surrounding landscapes deserve collective care. Through annual festivals, rituals, and oral narratives, communities reaffirm their responsibility to preserve these sacred spaces.

Viewed through the lens of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Ayyanar worship represents an indigenous system of environmental governance. The association of the deity with forests and water bodies discourages indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources and promotes sustainable practices rooted in cultural values. Community participation in maintaining shrine precincts indirectly contributes to conserving local biodiversity and maintaining ecosystem services.

Ecocritical analysis further suggests that Ayyanar narratives dissolve rigid distinctions between humans and nature. The deity's protective role extends not only to village inhabitants but also to the landscapes that sustain them. This worldview contrasts with exploitative models of development by emphasizing reciprocity, responsibility, and coexistence.

In the context of climate change and environmental degradation, Ayyanar worship offers an important example of how indigenous cultural traditions can support ecological resilience. Recognizing such practices as ecological archives broadens the understanding of conservation beyond scientific management to include cultural memory, ritual practice, and community ethics.

Conclusion

Folk traditions constitute far more than cultural expressions preserved through oral transmission; they serve as dynamic ecological archives that embody generations of indigenous environmental knowledge. This study has demonstrated that folk songs, myths, proverbs, sacred groves, and ritual practices preserve practical wisdom concerning biodiversity conservation, water management, sustainable agriculture, and ecological ethics. Through the perspectives of ecocriticism, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), and cultural ecology, the paper has shown that these traditions reflect a worldview in which humans are inseparably connected with the natural environment.

The case studies of *kāvu* (sacred groves) and Ayyanar worship illustrate how Tamil folk traditions integrate ecological stewardship into cultural and religious practices. These traditions have historically contributed to the protection of forests, water bodies, native flora, and wildlife through community participation and customary beliefs. Such examples challenge the perception that environmental conservation depends solely on modern scientific or legal frameworks, demonstrating instead that indigenous communities have long practised sustainable resource management through culturally embedded knowledge systems.

In the context of accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation, indigenous ecological knowledge preserved in folk traditions remains highly relevant. Recognising these traditions as legitimate knowledge systems can enrich environmental education, strengthen community-based conservation, and foster more inclusive approaches to sustainable development. Rather than treating folklore as a relic of the past, it should be understood as a living intellectual resource that continues to inform ecological resilience and environmental ethics.



This study contributes to the growing dialogue between folklore studies, ecocriticism, and environmental humanities by proposing that folk traditions function as ecological archives linking cultural memory with environmental sustainability. Future research may extend this inquiry through comparative studies of indigenous traditions across different regions, field-based documentation of oral ecological knowledge, and interdisciplinary collaborations that integrate literary scholarship with environmental science. Such research will further demonstrate the continuing significance of folk literature in addressing contemporary ecological challenges while preserving the cultural heritage of indigenous communities.

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