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Singing Sustainability: Teaching Ecological Consciousness through Kerala's Agrarian Folksongs in the Language Classroom

Dr Shoba Liza John¹, Ms. Christy Jacqueline²

¹Sacred Heart College, Thevara Email: <u>shobalizjohn@shcollege.ac.in</u>

ORCID iD:0009-0000-6740-1026

Abstract

Folksongs are living repositories of indigenous ecological wisdom and cultural identity. In Kerala, agrarian folksongs such as Kalappari Pattukal, Njattupattu, Viththidiyilpattu, Koythupattu, and Onasadya Pattu — reflect a deeply ingrained understanding of sustainable agricultural practices, seasonal cycles, biodiversity, and communal values. This paper explores the pedagogical potential of these folksongs in language teaching to foster ecological literacy alongside linguistic competence. Drawing from textual analysis of selected songs and proposing classroom methodologies, the study demonstrates how traditional oral literature can serve as an effective tool for sustainability education, promoting both cultural heritage and environmental consciousness.

Keywords

Kerala folklore, agrarian folksongs, sustainability, language pedagogy, ecological literacy, cultural heritage, oral literature

INTRODUCTION

In the face of global environmental crises, education for sustainability has become a crucial priority. Our fast lifestyles are affecting our relationship with the Earth and also with each other, thus generating a lot of life menacing diseases.

Kerala's agrarian folksongs—passed down through generations—encapsulate an intimate relationship between humans and nature, offering valuable lessons on sustainable living. Such wisdom in order to be kept alive has to be sowed in the hearts and minds of the sprouting generation. However, modern curricula often neglect the wealth of ecological wisdom embedded in traditional oral literature.

This paper examines how Kerala's agrarian folksongs can be used in language classrooms to promote both linguistic skills and ecological consciousness thereby promoting sustainability. By analyzing the thematic content of these songs and suggesting pedagogical applications, the study advocates for an integrated approach to sustainability education through literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature and art forms portrays the story of humans.the main genre of literature which opens the naked lifestyle of humanbeings are folksongs (G Sasidharan Pilla 2011) Production is a part of human culture. The ways in which we have cultivated and harvested the produce has not been the same. Hence the culture associated with different forms of production process has been different and hence the folksongs associated with it. Different parts of Kerala have different varieties of agrarian folksongs. (Utharakeralathile vithupaatukal, M.V.VISHNUNAMBOOTHIRI). Krishigatha is a collection of valuable lessons on farming in the form of songs. It describes the time for each process involved in

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agriculture and also the type of rice, the type of soil etc. (Keralathile pazhayakaala krishiyekurichoralochana, Dr.M.Gangadharan)

The value of indigenous knowledge systems in sustainability education has been widely acknowledged (Shiva 2000; Berkes 2012). Oral literature, particularly folksongs, serves as a potent medium for transmitting this knowledge (Narayan 2010). In the Indian context, Kerala's rich folk traditions are recognized for their ecological ethos (Nair 2015).

At the same time, language pedagogy has evolved toward content-based instruction and culturally responsive teaching (Byram 2008). Integrating local cultural texts into language education not only enhances linguistic competence but also fosters intercultural understanding and critical thinking. However, the specific use of agrarian folksongs in language classrooms remains an underexplored area.

This paper bridges this gap by demonstrating how Kerala's folksongs can contribute to sustainability education within language learning contexts.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs qualitative textual analysis of selected agrarian folksongs provided from Kerala. Themes related to sustainability, ecological balance, community practices, and traditional agricultural wisdom were identified. Based on these themes, pedagogical strategies were developed to integrate the songs into language teaching.

The target learners include secondary and higher education students in both first language and foreign language contexts. The proposed activities align with the goals of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as outlined by UNESCO (2017).

Analysis of Folksongs as Texts of Sustainability

For the purpose of study, songs related to various stages in farming have been taken and also certain songs pertaining to regional festival, the varieties of cultivated products, the manner of preparing a product have been analysed.

Kalappari Pattukal (Ploughing Songs)

"Venal kanju karinju padaththu neeru thalikkaan / Ponnambili poothu malayile mettin mazhaeva..."

ക ളപ്പറി പാട്ടുകൾ

വേനൽ കാഞ്ഞ് കരിഞ്ഞ പാടത്ത് നീര് തളിക്കാൻ പൊന്നമ്പിളി പൂത്ത മലയിലെ മേട്ടിന്ന് മഴയെ വാ.

തൈ തൊട്ടിൽ ഊത്ത പരലുകൾ കൂത്താടണ ചേലുകൾ കാണാൻ, മയിലാടും കുന്നിന് മുകളിൽ പെയ്യാൻ വായോ മഴയെ.

ആനയ്ക്ക് തേച്ചു കുളിക്കാൻ കാലിക്ക് വയർ നിറയ്ക്കാൻ പൊന്നമ്പിളി പൂത്ത മലയിലെ മേട്ടിന്ന് മഴയെ വാ.

പരിയത്തെ പാവല് വള്ളി പൂവണിയാൻ വിരിയാൻ കായ്യാൻ പൊന്നമ്പിളി പൂത്ത മലയിലെ മേത്തിന്ന് മഴയേ വാ.

അക്കരെ പാർക്കുന്ന കൊച്ചമ്മയ്ക്ക് പാവയ്ക്ക കൂട്ടാൻ പാരം കൊതി നട്ടത് പാവല് മുളച്ചത് കോവല് കേറിപ്പടർന്ന ഒരു പപ്പരയ്ക്ക്

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താലോലം പാടി പറിക്കാൻ ചെന്നപ്പോൾ തൂങ്ങിക്കിടന്ന ഒരു കുമ്പളങ്ങ വെച്ചത് പുളിശ്ശേരി കൂട്ടിത്തെരു ശ്ശേരി വായിൽ ചൊവച്ചൊരു മധുരക്കറി.

This song is a call by the farmer to rain on the crops so that it will flower . it as contains the names of vegetables cultivated in his field like bittergourd, as hgourd and also the dishes we can make with these vegetables.

This song depicts the farmers' longing for rain to rejuvenate parched fields. The imagery highlights respect for natural cycles and the interdependence between human life and environmental forces. The songs foster an attitude of gratitude toward nature and an understanding of seasonal rhythms essential for sustainable agriculture.

Njattupattu (Planting Songs)

"Marimazhakal chorinje cheruvayalugal okke nananju / Pootiya orukki paranj njarugal kettiyerinje..." ഞാറ്റുപാട്ട്

മാരിമഴകൾ ചൊരിഞ്ഞെ ചെറുവയലുകൾ ഒക്കെ നനഞ്ജ് പൂട്ടിയ ഒരുക്കി പറഞ് ഞാറുകൾ കെട്ടിയെറിഞ്ഞേ ഓമല ചെന്തില മാല

തെയ്യോ തിന്തോ തിന്നു ദിനം താരോ ന്തീനം താരോ

എല്ലാരും പെണ്ണാളെ ഞാറു പറിച്ച് ഞാനും എൻറെ അക്കയും ഞാറു പറിച്ചു ഇക്കാണുന്ന നെടുവയൽ എല്ലാം നമ്മുടെ ചോര പൊടിഞ്ഞതും ആണ്

തമ്പ്രാൻ പാടത്തിറങ്ങിയതും ഇല്ലേ

ഇക്കണ്ടം നട്ടെ മറു കണ്ടം നട്ടെ

കാലത്ത് ചെല്ലുമ്പോൾ പച്ചരി ക്കഞ്ഞിയും ചേമ്പിന്റെ താളും കണ്ടേക്കും വൈകിട്ട് ചെല്ലുമ്പോൾ മൂന്നാരിനെല്ലോ അല്ലെങ്കിൽ ചക്രം പത്തു കണ്ടേക്കും.

This song depicts the farmers happiness in finding the fields filled with produce.

Planting songs celebrate communal labor and biodiversity. They emphasize patience, cooperation, and the importance of nurturing the land. The reference to 'our blood soaking the fields' metaphorically underscores the deep bond between farmers and their environment.

Viththidiyilpattu (Sowing Songs)

"Malarkkavil undayathane annam / Cheru kili kondu vanne..."

വിത്തിടിയിൽ പാട്ട്

മലർക്കാവിൽ ഉണ്ടായതാണെ അന്നം ചെറു കിളി കൊണ്ടു വന്നേ

ആരിയൻ മണലാരിയൻ പിന്നെ കാരരി യൻ കരുത്താരി യനും

ചിറ്റേനി പൊക്കാളി ഞാരൻ ഞവരയും വെട്ടിവിരിപ്പേ ചെറുവിരിപ്പേ കാരിയാകണ്ണൻ കരി യികണ്ണൻ പിന്നെ ചിന്തിയും ചെമ്പാവും ചേമലചെമ്പ മഞ്ചകോടിയൻ മലയെലപ്പം നെല്ലേ

ചേഞെരിവണ ലും ചേരവാലൻ

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വെള്ളത്തിൽ തത്തുന്ന തവള തുടിപ്പനും നെല്ലുള്ള്ള പാണ്ടികൊള്ളപാ ലയും

പൂമിക്കു പൊന്നായ നേന്മണികൾ

Sowing songs depicts various traditional rice varieties and sowing techniques, preserving knowledge about agricultural biodiversity. They promote local seed sovereignty and resilience, key components of sustainable food systems. They also sensitise the listeners on the names of different rice, which is actually not known among the present generation. Aariyan, manalaariyan, chenjeri, chinthi are all brands of rice cultivated of which we are not aware of.

Malayalam Months

മലയാള മാസങ്ങൾ

പിച്ചിപൂവുടയാടകൾ ചുറ്റി

പുഞ്ചിരിതൂകും ഞാൻ ചിങ്ങം

പുത്തൻ കൊയ്യിന് പൊന്നറിവാളുകൾ

രാകിമീനുക്കും ഞാൻ കന്നി

കരിമുകിലിൻ കുടം ഒക്കതെന്തി

കുളിക്കും എൺപേർ നല്ല തുലാം

കാർഥികനെയ്യിരി വിളക്കുനീട്ടും

വൃശ്ചിക മല്ലോ സുന്ദരി ഞാൻ

കുറുമൊഴി മുല്ല കുടന്നതൂകി

കഥാപറയും ഞാൻ ധനുവല്ലോ

മാവിൻ മരതക മണികളൊരുക്കി

മധുരിത മകരം ഞാനല്ലോ

This is a song about months in a Malayalam year and the cultivation and the seasons are marked according to these. Our assumption is that if such songs are taught in class it can spread awareness on local culture.

Onasadya Pattu (Feast Songs)

"Appam venam ada venam / Parappayum pappadavum venam..."

ഓണസദ്യ

അപ്പം വേണം അട വേണം

പരപ്പേരും പപ്പടവും വേണം

കറികളതഞ്ജും വേറെ വേണം

തൈരും നെയ്യും തേനും ഗുളവും

കോട്ടത്തെങ്ക മലരും പഴവും

മുട്ടാതെന്നും മധുപര്ക്കം വേണം

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മേളം ചേർക്കും തുമ്പപ്പു മലരോളി

ചോറും പായസവും ഒക്കെ വേണം.

Festival songs highlight sustainable food traditions centered on local, seasonal, and plant-based ingredients. They subtly promote responsible consumption and cultural practices aligned with ecological well-being.

Pedagogical Applications in Language Classrooms

Kerala's agrarian folksongs offer rich material for language education at various levels:

Vocabulary Development

Students learn agricultural terms, seasonal references, and local flora and fauna.

Grammar and Syntax

Analyzing folk song structures introduces students to poetic forms, colloquial expressions, and regional linguistic features.

Cultural Awareness

Students gain insights into traditional ecological practices and cultural values, fostering intercultural competence.

Critical Thinking

Discussions compare traditional agricultural wisdom with modern practices, encouraging critical reflection on sustainability.

Creative Expression

Students compose their own songs or poems on sustainability themes, applying language skills creatively.

Sample Classroom Activity

- Listen to Niattupattu.
- Discuss the biodiversity represented in traditional rice cultivation.
- Compare with modern monoculture practices.
- Compose a new planting song that reflects current sustainability challenges and solutions.

DISCUSSION

Integrating Kerala's agrarian folksongs into language classrooms supports multiple educational objectives. It enhances linguistic competence, deepens cultural understanding, and promotes ecological literacy. Such an approach aligns with the goals of ESD and fosters a holistic worldview among learners.

Moreover, this integration bridges the gap between traditional knowledge and contemporary education, offering a culturally grounded, experiential learning model. It revitalizes or alliterature as a living pedagogical resource for sustainability education.

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CONCLUSION

Kerala's agrarian folksongs embody timeless lessons in sustainable living and community values. By incorporating these oral traditions into language teaching, educators can cultivate both linguistic skills and environmental consciousness. This approach not only preserves cultural heritage but also equips learners with the ecological empathy needed for a sustainable future.

Future research could explore empirical classroom studies to assess learning outcomes and further refine pedagogical methodologies. As we strive for innovative pathways in sustainability education, the synergy of folklore and language pedagogy offers a promising direction.

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