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Stability and Fecundity in the New Maayapuram of P. Surendran's *Maayapuraanam*

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Abstract: P. Surendran's *Maayapuraanam* (1997) can be read as a case study of the stable bioregional organic farming community of Maayapuram, whose secure, self-sufficient, and serene ecological life stands in contrast to the failed interventions of neo-global imperial multinational corporations represented through the character of Sadasivan. Snehalatha's longing for motherhood is symbolically expressed through her recurring vision of thousands of male infants—little Krishnas—resting on the leaves of a vast pipal tree, suggesting an interior landscape shaped by the idea of a bio-continuum. Puraanic elements function as forms of resistance for the inhabitants of Maayapuram and later for Snehalatha herself against imperial intrusion into the ecological integrity of the region. The cucumber rituals and their association with fertility and childbirth further validate the ecological worldview of the community and symbolically resist destructive developmental interventions.

Snehalatha's unfulfilled desire for motherhood is displaced into magical and Puraanic visions associated with an uncanny tree within the agrarian ecotopia of Maayapuram—the term *puram*, lexically meaning town or city, here signifying a rustic ecological settlement. The narrative thus becomes a *puraanam* of ecological balance and sustainability. The natural fertility of the native soil parallels the regeneration of fecundity within Snehalatha herself. The text ultimately suggests that if the farmers of Maayapuram had accepted toxic fertilizers, pesticides, and terminator seeds, not only the soil but also the reproductive vitality of women in the community would have been threatened, thereby linking ecological degradation with bodily and cultural dispossession.

Keywords: *Maayapuram, Malayalam Literature, Ecological Imperialism, Bioregionalism, Organic Farming, Multinational Corporations*

P. Surendran (born 4 November 1961) is an Indian writer, columnist, art critic, and philanthropist. He has published more than thirty books, including works of fiction, travel writing, and general prose in Malayalam, as well as a collection of short stories in English. He currently teaches at Kumaranellur School in the Palakkad district. An accomplished literary figure and art critic in Malayalam, Surendran has received several major awards, including the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (2003, 2013), the Odakkuzhal Award (2004), and the Padmarajan Award (2011). His book on the artist A. Ramachandran received the Kerala Lalithakala Akademi Award for the best book on art criticism. His stories have been translated into English, Hindi, and several other Indian languages. Surendran first gained prominence in Kerala's literary sphere after winning first prize in the short story competition conducted by Mathrubhumi Weekly in 1981. His first collection of short stories, *Piriyam Govani*, was published in 1986.

Maayapuraanam (1997) presents the stable bioregional organic farming community of Maayapuram as a self-sufficient and ecologically balanced society whose way of life stands in contrast to the failed interventions of neo-global imperial multinational corporations represented through the character of Sadasivan. The narrative may be read as a case study of resistance to ecological imperialism.

Alfred W. Crosby, in *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (1986), explains ecological imperialism as a process through which colonial expansion transformed ecosystems by introducing new plant species, animals, and agricultural systems into colonized territories. Colonial conquest, he argues, often involved a parallel conquest of indigenous flora and fauna. In the postcolonial period, two contradictory processes continue to operate simultaneously: the systematic destruction of biodiversity on the one hand, and the increasing intervention of global environmental agencies on the other. This paradoxical dynamic may also be understood as a contemporary form of ecological imperialism, in which ecological discourse itself becomes a tool of domination.

Ecological imperialism thus refers to the transformation of ecosystems through migration, colonization, and economic expansion. It examines the ecological consequences of territorial conquest and development, including biodiversity loss, environmental restructuring, and the marginalization of local populations. During the Age of Exploration, European expansion across continents led to the introduction of new species, the alteration of landscapes, and the disruption of indigenous ecological balances.

Maayapuraanam is deeply rooted in the traditions, rituals, beliefs, and oral narratives of the village of Maayapuram. The text emphasizes the importance of traditional agriculture and agro-ethical practices as foundations for holistic development. From a bioregional perspective, the novel illustrates how the inhabitants of Maayapuram resist the encroachment of contemporary industrial culture. Their resilience

enables them to withstand the ideological pressures, discursive practices, and material temptations associated with post-Industrial Revolution modernity.

Sadasivan and Snehalatha, dissatisfied with the sterile and hurried life of the city, seek refuge in the mythical and agrarian space of Maayapuram. Snehalatha's desire for motherhood motivates their journey toward this sanctuary-like ecological settlement. As she expresses, "Let's go to Mayapuram, Shiva. My mind says that is the place where we should live now." Their relocation reflects a symbolic movement from technological modernity toward ecological rootedness.

However, the existence of this ecological community is threatened by the expansionist ambitions of multinational corporations. The destructive role of technocratic agricultural modernization is represented through the Green Tech Company and its director, who attempts to persuade Sadasivan to introduce high-tech farming methods to the villagers. The farmers of Maayapuram, however, continue to practice agriculture as a fertility ritual rather than as an industrial enterprise. Their needs remain minimal, and their agricultural practices rely on organic manure and traditional seeds preserved across generations. They cultivate crops primarily for subsistence and cotton for clothing. Bullocks are used for transportation and ploughing, while only a few comparatively affluent villagers use bicycles.

The farmers of Mayapuram reach the fields in early mornings. They consider farming as their prayer and hobby...After the harvest, the surplus is taken by bullock carts to the market in Sureban and buy necessary things from there. There is an innocence in their philosophy of life and that attracts Sadashivan and Snehalatha. (152)

During his first visit to the branch office at Ramanagaram, Sadasivan encounters several representatives from nearby villages who share a common objective: "to liberate farmers from the clutches of traditional agriculture through technological and scientific farming" (153). During the meeting, the detailed report on the farmers of Maayapuram becomes a subject of humorous discussion. Sadasivan realizes that meeting the farmers directly in their fields during the daytime would be a more effective strategy for influencing them.

One delegate in each village like Sadashivan. The purpose was to bring the principles of modern technology to the community and free the farmers from the conventional farming methods... But agriculture is like worship for them. Superstitions beliefs have major role in their farm life. They pray and pay their gratitude to the presiding village deity for each and every crop-gain, corn grains, sunflowers that bloom and the cotton seeds which burst in their trees. Due to these superstitious beliefs, it is quite difficult to bring them to modernity. They are still considering sowing and reaping as an act of worshipping Goddess. (153)

The Director of the Agro Project issues a warning to Sadasivan and the other representatives. According to him, the farmers' belief in cultivation as a form of worship must be replaced by technological agricultural methods. Green Tech plans to transform the traditional agriculture of Maayapuram and similar villages by investing large sums of money obtained through foreign funding. The underlying reality, however, is that such technological interventions enable these corporations to expand their economic influence and consolidate their commercial power. The officer emphasizes the importance of the project's success, noting that it is also linked to national prestige. At the same time, he reminds them of the difficulty of their task, as the farmers are unlikely to accept modernization within their traditional practices without resistance.

The representatives are initially instructed to create awareness among the farmers, recognizing that it may take years for the villagers even to consider the idea of modernization. He cautions them not to act hastily when approaching the community, as the villagers tend to distrust outsiders and resist external interference in their daily agricultural routines. They preserve their inherited values as cultural treasures transmitted across generations. The officer remarks, somewhat ironically, that "the farmers seek God's opinion for anything and everything in their life. So, you may have to learn to talk to them through the Almighty" (154). He therefore instructs them to proceed gradually in implementing the project. Their efforts must begin with cotton cultivation, one of the major crops of the region; once successful there, they may then attempt to introduce technological changes into food-crop cultivation. The Director further observes that:

They are not yet prepared to renounce tradition. People need to be gradually convinced of modernity's benefits and revolutionary potential. A purely psychological approach is required. When engaging farmers, who are wary of everything that comes from outside, it is crucial...The task of educating farmers is being slowed considerably. It could sometimes take years. With cotton seeds, we can get started. Farmers may become irritated by the abrupt taste shift when working with food corporations. When this project is finished, we can prove to the outside world how modern agricultural methods have transformed the land and fundamentally altered the farming community. (154)

Sadasivan returns home with a bundle of papers which are to be distributed among the farmers to create awareness regarding scientific farming. Snehalatha compares him to missionary disseminating his religion. Sadasivan replies:

This is also a kind of preaching we have been directed to start the work with the mission of an evangelist. We are expected to disperse the idea of scientific farming among the farmers

like a preacher, who works for his religion. The mindset of the villagers should be ploughed to build technological empire upon the traditional system. . . (155)

Sadasivan, as the representative of this multinational bio-tech or agri-tech company, attempts to introduce high-yielding cotton seeds along with a modernist, profit-oriented agricultural mindset into the native agrarian community. The project director instructs him to function almost as a divine messenger who must propagate the “gospel” of biotechnology among the villagers, where industrial agriculture and technological development are positioned as objects of faith. However, the indigenous community neither abandons its cultural belief systems nor permits contemporary biotechnological terminator seeds to replace their traditional seed varieties. They remain content with the resources of their farm fields and ponds, as reflected in their collective decision to resist Green Tech’s intervention.

Sadasivan’s efforts at persuasion therefore prove unsuccessful. Some farmers complain to the Grama Sabha and suggest that he be punished or expelled from the village. However, Nagarajan, a figure of local credibility and influence, extends his support to Sadasivan.

Everything was told to Nagaraja. With a tearful smile he grasped Sadasivan's hand. He said that Sadashivan also has soil in Mayapuram. Sadashivan finally consented to go for his own home, but it was decided not to pack up anything and leave. Leave Mayapuram alone. There is a return. He already knows that he is going to quit his job. He was unable to transport any weight on this journey. He then went to Ramanagaram to resign. It is well known that until he quits the work, Mayapuram will not accept them in its heart. Don't blame Mayapuram's inhabitants. Everyone has the freedom to live and die as they wish. 'We must reside in Mayapuram', said Snehalatha. 'But Shiva, how will we survive if we return?' 'By farming'. Sadashivan's answer was firm.

The farmers and village elders agree to permit Sadasivan and Snehalatha to reside in Maayapuram conditionally: they must observe and adhere to the rites and regulations of the village, and the “devilish messages” from the outside world must no longer be propagated. Nagarajan offers them land for residence and cultivation. Sadasivan ultimately decides to abandon the assignment imposed upon him by the multinational corporation, thereby rescuing himself from becoming a scapegoat in the project of post-global ecological imperialism.

The title *Maayapuraanam* carries interiorized significations such as illusion, the virtual or mythical, the ancient yet new (*pura–nava*), and historical narrative. Such layered textual structures and submerged subtexts create productive sites for examining the comparative dimensions of pre-Independence and post-Independence forms of green imperialism. As a *puraanam*, *Maayapuraanam* is

simultaneously *pura* and *nava*—old and new—and therefore capable of recurring across historical moments, particularly after the institutionalization of ecological imperialism.

As Alfred W. Crosby argues in *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, colonialism possesses a significant ecological dimension. European colonial ideology often legitimized biological expansion by representing indigenous biodiversity as underproductive. Through the dissemination of toxic chemicals and terminator seeds, such processes symbolically and materially “pollute” both land and consciousness, leading to the erosion of indigenous ecological systems and knowledge traditions.

Similarly, Scott Slovic, in “Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology,” observes that “nature writing is a ‘literature of hope’ in its assumption that the elevation of consciousness may lead to wholesome political change,” while also remaining deeply concerned with interior landscapes and the workings of the human mind. In this context, Snehalatha’s recurring vision of thousands of boy-infants—little Krishnas—resting on the leaves of a vast pipal tree reflects an interiorized imagination of bio-continuity and ecological regeneration. Puraanic elements thus function as forms of resistance for the inhabitants of Maayapuram and later for Snehalatha herself against imperial intrusion into the ecological integrity of the village. The cucumber rituals and the consequent promise of childbirth further validate the ecological worldview of the community and symbolically resist imperial developmental interventions.

Maayapuraanam begins and concludes with descriptions that cannot be fully understood without interpreting the magical imaginings and the Puraanic influx into Snehalatha’s interior landscape. Both the opening and the closing of the novel present the image of a tree that exists only within her mental world and is therefore visible exclusively to her:

In the wide land, a lonely tree.

It resists the coming spiral wind. Suddenly, all the hitherto parallel branches stand erect. Then, in the wild dust, it sinks.

...

Watching this, Snehalatha stands, as if immersed in some magical vision. It is very near to her; yet, the wind is seen only through the tree, she cannot sense. Window panes, though open, are not shaken. The tree’s throbbing, she can hear. To her dismay, her curls do not move.

What is source of this wind that tries to uproot the tree?

...

Not a delusion.

Reality to Maayapuram.

Once, she asked about tree to Nagarajan. He only smiled. Hurt and angry, she alleged that Nagarajan supports Sadasivan...

There is no tree special at Maayapuram. The people there do not worship as alone, even the tree of the Mother Goddess, Joggamma, is not adored as especially sacred.

Farmers in their fields grow trees. The tree is for shelter, for the farmers and their deity.

The deity has no regular form. Only saffron-smearred stone. Trees are the umbrella of such sacred stones...

Once, Snehalatha showed Sadasivan the picture of a magical tree in a magazine. She tells him that she has seen such a tree.

A mysterious metamorphosis of branches. Boughs with shapes of birds and beasts. Instead of leaves, there are beaks and wings.

...

In the seeds, embryos that long for blooming.

Have we seen such a tree?

What is the supernatural of the tree?

'Tell, Siva, what is it?'

Sadasivan has no answer.

Delusion. . . Its mystic visions. . . In her dreams, only the thoughts of child-birth. (105-106)

This is the opening description of the uncommon tree. The novel also ends with a similar description. Devamma, the old woman, nurses Snehalatha, during her pregnancy and she has resided at the mystical, magical farming village, Maayapuram. Devamma dissuades her from going to her native place for the delivery. Myths and legends on Joggamma, the presiding mother goddess of Maayapuram, narrated by Devamma open Snehalatha's eyes. She feels that the window leading towards the reality at Maayapuram is opened:

The window reopens to the reality at Maayapuram. Through it, the mystic tree brightens. Once again, Snehalatha walks alone to the base of the tree.

The tree has changed a lot.

There is not a single leaf. On all branches, infants, infants only. (176)

The two visions of the supernatural or Puraanic tree cited above exemplify what Scott Slovic describes as *correspondence*—the empathetic relationship between the human mindscape and the mysterious presences of nature (“Environmental Psychology”). Snehalatha’s unfulfilled desire for motherhood is displaced into magical or Puraanic visions of an uncanny tree located within the agrarian and symbolic landscape of Maayapuram—the term *puram*, in its lexical sense, meaning town or city. The narrative of *Maayapuraanam* thus becomes the *puraanam* of an ecologically balanced *topia* or ecotopia. The fertility of the native soil corresponds to the regeneration of fecundity within Snehalatha herself. The text further suggests that if the farmers of Maayapuram had permitted the use of toxic fertilizers, pesticides, and terminator seeds, not only the soil but also the reproductive vitality of women in the community would have been threatened.

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