



ஹிஸ்ப்
வட்டெலு
அன்றில்

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(Tamil)

The Ibis- An Icon of Everlasting Love

Sangam literature is filled with odes to intimate, everlasting love. And more often than not the ardent poems deal with the deep pangs of unrequited love and the unendurable pain of separation. Drawing on nature to edify such deep emotions adds poignance to these serenades. One such inspiration from nature is the graceful ibis.

The red-necked *Pseudibis papillosa* or the glossy ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* are the species most often referred to in these verses. An inhabitant of wetlands, this bird finds a place in the poems based on the coastal landscape- Neytal. The ibis roosts amidst the fronds of the palmyra tree. With tribes flourishing around the ubiquitous, versatile palm tree, rightly referred to as the 'Karpaga Vrکشam', the life cycle of the ibis found a matching echo with the occupants of the sprawling habitations near the palm trees.

This elegant bird is monogamous. It is believed to waste away at the loss of its mate, is it any wonder then that it provides the perfect analogy for devoted love?!

There are 17 references to this bird in Sangam literature.

Akanānūru – 50, 120, 260, 305, 360

Kalithokai – 129, 131, 137

Kurunthokai – 160, 177, 301

Natrinai – 124, 152, 218, 303, 335

Kurinjippāttu – 219



It is interesting to note that the human-triad involved in these poems of love include: the handsome hero who is elsewhere, the gorgeous heroine who pines for her love and the impish lady friend of the heroine who boldly intervenes to smooth matters out. The poems that refer to the ibis are so evocative that the Neytal landscape unfurls in one's mind- one can almost experience the rush of the waves, feel the graininess of the sand underfoot and hear the rustling of the palmyra fronds where roosts the ibis.

Akanānūru – verse 50- Just as the ibis bird in the palmyra tree in the backyard doesn't sleep and agonizes when it's partner does not visit, so too does the heroine fret.

In 120 the friend of the heroine coyly welcomes the lover to stay the night referring to the beauty of the ibis cry and the charm of the vast backwaters.

260 blames the ibis birds that mate amidst the palmyra fronds reminding the distraught heroine about the absence of her partner.

In 305 the pitiful cries of the lonely ibis finds an echo in the separated lover's heart.

In 360 the heroine's friend lures the lover to the ibis inhabited front yard.

Kalithokai – 129 here the friend calls out in anguish to the lone ibis in her yard demanding to know if it too was deserted by a cunning lover.

The heroine even as she swings in a swing made of shark bones and lily ropes in 131 laments to her friend about how the ibis was a sad witness to her love.

Here in 137 again the damsel in distress refers to the female ibis that is suffering like her.

Kurunthokai – 160 gives a detailed description of the ibis with it's flame like red crest and the prawn-like curved beak and that the cries of the male and female ibises makes the separation so much harder to bear.

In 177 the friend reassures the sulking heroine that the hero will come to her by dusk, when the ibis hoots gently in it's nest

301 refers more dramatically to a black- legged pregnant ibis that coos soulfully for it's mate.

Natrinai – In 124 the heroine laments that her pain of separation is similar to that of an ibis separated from it's mate.

In 152 the helpless hero identifies himself with the male ibis in the throes of denied passion.

In 218 the hero has not returned during the promised season and the distressed heroine wonders if the cry of the ibis from it's rough barked tree will remind her constantly of her lost love.

In 303 the heroine (speaks to her friend and the hero listens surreptitiously) complains that the screeches of the ibis couple makes sure she never forgets her lover.

In 335 the cries of the ibis birds kindle her desire for love.

In Kurinjippāttu verse 219, the poet refers to the ibis' call as resembling the sound of the vayir instrument (a wind musical instrument similar to the nadaswaram).

This line up however does not do justice to the very passionate and soulful verses of the Sangam literature!

The Ibis- Down the Ages, Across the Globe

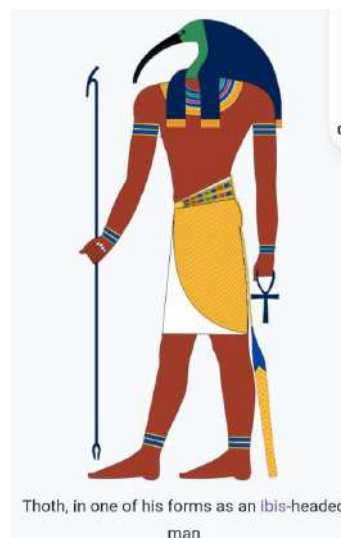
Ibises are an ancient species with fossil records going back 60 million years. The ibis has left its mark in the ancient Greek, Roman and Indian civilizations. The ancient Egyptians often sacrificed the ibis to Thoth, the god of the moon, reckoning, learning and writing. That they were considered sacred is evident from the fact that archaeologists have found the mummified remains of one and a half million ibises. It has been revered as an icon of fertility in the Noah's Ark too.

Human figures with a bird's head, intriguingly similar to Thoth, were found in the rock paintings at Kidaripatti in Madurai district (1000 – 500 BCE). Here the human figure's body is drawn as X type, holding a weapon in his right hand and overall he looks like a warrior, very similar to the Egyptian paintings. Paintings depicting human figures with masks of birds and animals may have been linked with ritualistic beliefs related for example to a successful hunt.

The mascot of the University of Miami in Florida is a White Ibis, affectionately called Sebastian the Ibis. Legend has it that they choose the White Ibis for their heroic ability to withstand hurricanes, which is the name of the university's football team.

They are markers of a healthy wetland ecosystem

But as far as ancient Tamil civilization goes the ibis was an icon of enduring love, loyalty and marital harmony.



- The above high resolution images of the ibis are available for free at www.intachmadurai.org
- Commercial use of the images for posters, T-shirts, ceramic mugs etc. is free too
- The black ibis can be spotted in the wetlands and fields around Madurai. Track the ibis bird closest to your location with the help of the e-birdlocator (ebird.org/ebird app)



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