ABSTRACT

This thesis is an ethnopoetic study of the oratures of Muduvan tribe, one of the prominent tribal communities of south India, living on the bordering regions of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. They have many rich oratures of their own as part of folklore handed down from their forefathers. The dialect they use has apparent similarities with both Malayalam and Tamil. Even though this thesis is an ethnopoetic study, it attempts to document and bring the oratures into mainstream academic field via translation. Since no such study has been done on their oratures, this thesis is an initial attempt to collect, document and study them in the academic field. The primary sources of the thesis which include songs of different genres, tales, proverbs and riddles, are collected by intense field work by staying with them in some their settlements in the Idukki district in Kerala. The different genres of oratures are put in different chapters along with their transliteration and translation. The first-hand information gathered from the field regarding their culture and tradition are incorporated in the thesis whenever necessary. The thesis is divided into five chapters.

Chapter I Presents a brief description of Muduvan’s geographical location and socio-cultural background which helps one to understand the subsequent chapters. Anthropological and sociological data available so far along with first hand information gathered from the field are part of the
discussion. The field of study is described along with the primary sources selected. In this chapter the need for preserving oral literatures which are vanishing and placing them as a vital part of the literary canon is discussed. An overview of folklore in general and in India along with various theories is also described. A summary of folklore studies in South India especially in Tamil Nadu and Kerala done so far is given. This chapter also presents the concept ‘ethnopoetics’ and its relevance in literary criticism. This section discusses the origin and growth of ethnopoetics and the views of scholars like Jerome Rothenberg, Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock and others as a frame for understanding the subsequent chapters. The objective, scope and the contents of the subsequent chapters are finally outlined in this chapter.

Chapter II is devoted entirely to the analysis of Muduvan’s Āśaippātu (Love-song) which are available in large numbers and sung on various occasions. The love songs are divided broadly on the basis of context and theme. The performance of songs at different contexts like marriage, puberty, and leisure time are discussed followed by a thematic analysis. The thematic analysis shows the numerous themes prevalent in their songs which are sung to express the Muduvan’s emotions and feelings. The transliterated and translated versions of the songs are put in the end of the chapter.

Chapter III deals with other genres of Muduvan’s songs like Tālātu (Lullaby), Kummippātu (literally ‘clap-song’ songs sung to rhythmic clapping and communal dancing), Songs sung at the time of work and at work places,
Festival songs and Oppāri (Mourning song at the occasion of death). The lengthy renderings of these songs are notable for their rhythm and rhyme. This is erased both in print and in translation even though one could show it by printing the sound syllables.

Chapter IV analyses the different tales, proverbs and riddles that were made available. Muduvans have tales that deal with their migration, history, beliefs and legends. It is difficult to differentiate their tales from their socio-cultural background. The proverbs and riddles show the amount of knowledge that they have got either from their forefathers or from their daily-life and experiences.

Chapter V is the conclusion. This chapter sums up the findings of previous chapters. The chapter also discusses the problems in translation. This is followed by the bibliography. Followed by the bibliography the appendix consists of two parts: (i) A descriptive glossary is given here, followed by a table of primary informants. (ii) Maps and illustrations which document the physical locale of the Muduvan tribes are given with a brief description. One can observe that Muduvans have rich oratures performed at different occasions. This thesis takes space to assert that it is high time to document and place oratures in the literary canon because these are vanishing rapidly.