

The Taming of Alli: Mythic Images and Tamil Women

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This paper looks at the imaging of women in myth and history focussing on the transformational qualities of myths. I shall seek to contextualize some leading Tamil myths, which are women-centred in terms of their historical and geographical specificity. A critical study of such a leading Tamil myth - the legend of Alli, demonstrates the gradual process by which an indigenous narrative is tamed to fit the patriarchal mould. The myth in the process of its transmissions and transmutations does not follow a linear course but tends to zigzag between the imaging of women within the indigenous Tamil tradition and their absorption into the Brahmanic-patriarchal stereotyping of women.

Tamil Women and a Mahabharata Myth

This study of the birth of a myth from the Mahabharata is an attempt to contextualize the process of transmission and transmutation of a great epic mythology. The myth of Alli and her marriage to Arjuna, a leading protagonist of the Mahabharata hence constitutes a significant regional variant of a grand narrative. Wendy O'Flaherty's statement could well be the starting point of such a study. I quote:

The Mahabharata grows out of the oral traditions; it flickers back and forth between Sanskrit manuscripts and village storytellers, each adding new lists to the old story, constantly reinterpreting it.

The Mahabharata epic is located primarily in Northern India, with the main action centers—Indraprastha, Hastinapura and Kurukshetra—situated geographically in the modern regions of Delhi and Haryana. Yet this great epic crossed the Vindhya fairly early and reached the Tamil country during the Sangam period of the Tamils (roughly 3rd century BC to 3rd century AD). The great battle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas is referred to by the Sangam poet, Perunthevanar, who wrote the text called 'Bharatam'. According to the Chinnamanur copperplate inscription belonging to the 10th century AD, the Pandya

king Rajasimha II issued official orders for the translation of the Mahabharata into Tamil. Specific myths and legends from the Mahabharata are associated with the Pancha Pandava rathas at Mahabalipuram; the temple to Krishna Parthasarathy at Tiruvellikeni (Triplicane) in Madras and Vedambur in Tanjavur (Tanjore) associated with the Kirata Arjun fight.

Draupadi emerged as a major folk deity in the Tamil country with the temples to the Draupadi Amman being located in Chingleput, South Arcot, North Arcot and Salem districts.² In many of these temples, her worship is very similar to that of Mariamman, and fire walking is an important ritual of the Draupadi cult. Similarly, Gandhari Amman is worshipped by the Pallar and Pariayar communities, classified as depressed classes in the Tirunelveli district (K.Lakshminarayanan vide S Singh 1993: p238). The Tamils not only brought center stage the avenging woman Draupadi, but also interspersed the story of Alli, the Amazonian queen into the Mahabharata resulting in the transmutation of what appears to be a local myth. It is significant that Alli Rani herself does not move into the greater Mahabharata tradition but instead it is the great epic which moves southwards sucking into it many indigenous myths like the story of Alli. Thus the presence of Alli in the Mahabharata narrative is confined to South India and she finds no place in the Sanskrit north Indian versions of the epic.

The Alli myth in its various shifts and movements clearly points to a coming together of two traditions. *Alli Arasani Malai* combines indigenous Tamil traditions, which can be broadly categorised as Dravidian and the Sanskrit, Brahminical tradition, which makes its presence in South India towards the latter part of the Sangam age (Kadai Sangam). This cultural encounter was a drawn process, and its beginnings can be seen in the *Silappadikaram* which talks of the *Veriyattam*, an indigenous tradition of spirit possession side by side with the sacred fires of the Brahmins and the philosophical practices of the Buddhists and Jains. The Sanskrit penetration gained further ground in the Tamil country with the Brahmadeya land grants (land given to Brahmins) under the Pallavas. The riverine tracts called the Marudam region was the first to develop a certain degree of economic stratification based on land ownership. Economic stratification was closely followed by social stratification. Caste hierarchies were not indigenous to early Tamil societies which consisted of 'Kudi', a generic term meaning inhabitants. These kudis were economically stratified in terms of occupational differences but there were no caste hierarchies as such.³ The Sangam poet Avvaiyar, who was a low born 'Virali' (minstrel), of the Panar caste talks of her dining with the king at his

table. Such instances of social egalitarianism in ancient Tamil society can be multiplied.

The character of Alli is reminiscent of the Mudimangalir or the valorous women who feature time and again in the Sangam anthologies like *Pattupattu*, *Purananuru*, and *Ahananuru*. The Mullaipattu describes women carrying shining spears.⁴ T.N.Subramaniam, the historian specializing in the Sangam age, points out that women bodyguards of the king called his '*urimai surtram*' are referred to as being '*beautiful, courageous and alert*', all the adjectives which were used to describe Alli Rani.⁵

Alli was probably a local cult figure and the product of a society, which was non-patriarchal. H.W. Tambiah in his presentation on 'Pre-Aryan Customary Laws'⁶ refers to many early Tamil practices such as romantic unions, marriages following elopement etc. He authenticates his statement on pre-Brahmanical customs by quoting the *Tolkappiyam*, which opines "After untruth and rapacity appeared, the Brahmanical custom of *karanam* (formal marriage) came to be observed".⁷ P.V. Kane in his *History of Dharmashastras* suggests, that matriliney and the use of metronomes was not confined to Malabar in ancient times but prevailed in some other parts of South India as well.⁸ I would like to quote here the statement of the eminent Tamil scholar Thaninayagam⁹ on the megalithic culture of Tamil Nadu;

The only fact which is clear is that most, if not all of the Tamil speaking groups were originally matrilineal and even, in some cases, matrilocal.

The fusion of indigenous Tamil elements with the newly emerging Brahmanical forces in the South is demonstrated in the Alli myth in terms of the locale and its characters. For instance, the gypsy or kuratti who is an indispensable feature of the Kurunji Tinai or the hilly tract according to the eco-type created by the ancient text *Tolkappiyam* is present in the Alli stories. In *Alli Arasani Malai* Krishna appears as a gypsy singing of fertility of the Tamil country and recommends a charm to Arjuna to win the heart of the reluctant Alli.

The transformation of this quasi tribal society into a caste or jati based society was largely the influence of Brahmins leading to Sanskritization. Patriarchy which lies at the root of man's power and woman's subordination was a logical concomitant of Brahminization and Sanskritization. Brahminical notions of purity and pollution created untouchability and the distancing of those castes which performed menial services. At the same time, the notion of pollution also marginalized women both ritually and socially. The act of giving birth as well as her monthly menstrual cycles rendered a woman impure.

Ascriptive and prescriptive roles were assigned to women by male canonical writers which would enable man's control over women, in both sexual and social terms. The myth of Alli and its fusion into the Mahabharata epic has to be viewed in terms of this transformational phase of Tamil society.

The story of Alli is not the only myth which is about an Amazonian queen. An equally interesting parallel myth, probably a variant on the Alli myth is the folk ballad from the Kanyakumari district which narrates the exploits of a queen called Perarasiyar and her daughter Purushan Devi literally, 'The Male Woman Goddess'. In the legend of Alli her birth is through immaculate conception while in the myth of Perarasiyar and Purushan Devi, both conceive through the pollen carried by southerly winds from Sri Lanka. Like Alli they rule over a kingdom where women hold all the high posts and head their households while men are servile and subordinate. The story of Perarasiyar is however a localised one confined to the areas which came under the erstwhile Travancore state and hence it is difficult to study the mutations and changes within this myth..

The story of Alli is an extremely popular one, in the Tamil region, and is either narrated, sung as a ballad or performed on stage. Several versions of the *Alli Arasani Malai* exist, ranging from the composition of Pughazhendi Pulavar and Villiputurar in the Villupattu to the ones in the present century. The 16th Century poet also named Pughazhendi authored not only '*Alli Arasani Malai*' but also '*Pavazhakkodi Malai*' and '*Pulandaran Kalava Malai*', all of which are ballads related to the myth of Alli Arasani. An important version of the Alli myth, important in terms of its literary merit, was written as 'Alli Kadai' (the ballad of Alli) in the eighteenth century by Kappinipadi Pillai of Vellalur. While Alli of Pughazhendi Pulavar is still an uncompromising man hater till her transformation, the Alli of Kappinipadi Pillai is a softer version who runs to the aid of Arjuna when he swoons upon seeing her in the forests of Madurai.¹⁰ Chennai B. Ratna Nayakar & Sons, brought out a dramatic version of Alli called 'Alli Natakam' which began to be staged in the early part of the twentieth century but went into print later (Tirumagal Press, Madras 1967).

The legend of Alli has as its locale the Pandyamandalam region with Madurai as the focal point. The location of this myth in Madurai becomes extremely significant since the historical course of Madurai foregrounds the kind of power politics which has generated the Alli myth. The association of women with political power in the Pandyan kingdom (in striking contrast to other regions where male control over the state is unquestioned) can be seen in other origin legends

which seem to bear no direct connection with Alli. Interestingly, the well known historian Neelankanta Shastri, states in his 'History of South India', that according to oral tradition the Pandyan kingdom was founded by a woman. Even more seminal to the contextualisation of Alli in terms of gender and political power is the religious mythology which revolves around Meenakshi, the divine ruler of Madurai and her marriage to Siva called Sundaresvarar.

Madurai is among the oldest cities to figure in the hagiographies and literary texts of Tamil Nadu. It constitutes the dramatic setting of Ilango Adigal's *Silappadikaram* (a late-Sangam text) in which Kannagi avenges the royal miscarriage of justice leading to her husband's execution. The city of Madurai is described at length as the commercial and cultural heart of the country. Madurai gets referred to extensively in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and in the Greek sources such as *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* and Ptolemy's *Geography*. Given the glory and prosperity attached to the hoary kingdom of Madurai, the importance of gaining control over Madurai becomes self-evident. Madurai's historic past foregrounds the Meenakshi legend.

Kulasekhara Pandya was responsible for constructing the city of Madurai on the sacred site of a Siva linga making possible the matrimonial alliance cementing the sacred power symbolised in Siva and the secular power of the imperial Pandyas. Malayathuvasa Pandya who came in the lineage of Kulasekhara, was childless. He tried to remedy the situation by the performance of *parivelvi* i.e. horse sacrifices. The king's efforts failed to give him an heir but bestowed on him powers, which challenged the supremacy of Indra, the God of Gods. Seeing his own position being challenged Indra assured the king of a progeny if he performed the sacrifice known as *putrakameshti yaga*. The result of this sacrifice was a three year old daughter with the freakish feature of three breasts. The peculiar appearance of this girl born to rule over a kingdom, greatly depressed Malayathuvasa Pandya who prayed to Siva. The Tiruvilayadal Puranam which is the Sthala Purana (an account of the sacred geography) of Madurai records the response of Siva in the following canto:

O King! Treat your daughter as though she were a son:
Perform for her all the rites as specified in the Vedas.
Give her the name 'Tadatakal' and crown her
And when this woman, whose form is golden, meets her Lord,
One of her breasts will disappear.¹¹

The Sthalapurana reflects the uneasy tension that existed between the Brahmanical and the non-Brahmanical Tamil traditions. While

the choice of the ruling sex seems to harp back to the indigenous traditions of the Pandiamandalam, the *putrakameshti yaga* which enabled her birth is entirely Brahmanical. Patriarchal values once again get reflected in the peculiar myth about the third breast of Meenakshi which rendered her unfeminine but thereby more suitable for governance. In the canto called 'Tirumana patalam' or 'the marriage episode', Meenakshi encounters Somasundaresvarar and gets married to him. This alliance between Siva and Shakti, represented in the form of Meenakshi made the Pandyan kingdom politically invincible since cosmic power combined with secular power. The cementing of the sacred and the secular has been the cornerstone of every instance of state formation in south India. The alliance however was slanted heavily in favour of Meenakshi and this is borne by a popular saying in Tamil Nadu which is used to describe the nature of gender dominance within a marriage. Relatives and wedding guests mischievously ask whether Meenakshi will rule in the household or Nataraja (the sacred site of Chidambaram is dominated by the presence of Nataraja) who established his superiority over his female consort! It is in the light of the sthalapurana about Madurai Meenakshi that the entire legend of Alli is to be viewed.

Alli was the only child of a Pandyan king who is not located in chronological time or identified by name. It is said that Alli's was an immaculate conception since she was found on an 'alli' (Lily) flower at the conclusion of the performance of the 'Putra Kameshti Yaga'. The recurrence of the notion of immaculate conception in the myths of both Alli and Perarasiyar could be a significant pointer to describe characters who either deviated from or transcended role models. In a situation where both women rejected notions of female dependency on the male along with concomitant ideas of marriage and female sexuality, immaculate conception would tie in with their social non-conformism. Alli was sent to the Gurukula like any young man and became proficient in riding and the martial arts. The parallel with goddess Meenakshi is striking who is also said to have been proficient in both the martial arts and in hunting. In fact even today the dainty goddess at Madurai wears an apparel (resembling men's trousers) which society would term 'manly' but one that would befit the ruler of a powerful state.

Alli began her political career by defeating Neenmugan, the usurper to the Pandyan throne in battle, and was crowned the ruler of the Pandyan kingdom. Neenmugan himself is credited with a curious birth and is said to be the son born to a female crow (transformed as a maiden by the blessings of Siva and Parvati) and the Pandyan king

whose daughter was Alli. The son was crowned king by the royal couple who retired to the forests for a life of meditation and contemplation. Apparently at that point Alli was not considered for the position of ruler. The text of '*Alli Kadaï*' (verse: 45, canto I) says that Madurai itself acquired fame and glory because the valorous Alli destroyed the tyrant Neenmugan. The female heir Alli is clearly being preferred to the male heir Neenmugan who is born of a crow (turned maiden) not of a woman, in the popular imagination. The story of Alli thus commences with her vanquishing in battle an incompetent but legitimate heir to the throne and wresting power from him. The subsequent course of the legend is also within the paradigm of contestations of power and the conquest of power although eventually taking a very different trajectory.

The whole land is described as having been in terror of the Pandyan queen Alli. *The Pavazhakkodi Malai* says:

If you take the name of Alli
 Even the bird will not sip water
 If you take the name of Alli
 The goblins (Ganas) will dance.
 If you take the name of Alli
 The decapitated head will chatter!

(A.N.Nallaperumal: 1987: 39)

When Alli was ruling in Madurai, the much married Pandava prince Arjuna, set out with Krishna, his friend, cousin and spiritual guide on a long pilgrimage. Starting from Mathura and Kashi, the two pilgrims reached Madurai wearing the garb of ascetics. Here an innkeeper, according to one version, and a merchant according to another version, acquainted them with the valour and beauty of Alli. The man describes Alli's victory over Neenmugan and her authoritarian rule in Madurai under which any slight lapse would cause heads to roll (*Alli Natakam*: 1967: 12). Arjuna's sarcastic response at this point suggests the imaging of Alli as a "castrated male", a term used by feminist psychoanalysts like Julia Kristeva to describe social attitudes towards a non conforming woman. He tells the narrator that Alli was actually a man in female attire devoid of all femininity. At this, the narrator treats him to a detailed description of Alli's stunning beauty and her many charms. He further arouses the spirit of challenge in Arjuna by saying that Alli is a man hater:

If a man dares propose marriage
 She will cut him with her sword

(Alli Natakam: 1967: 14)

Arjuna is told that since she cannot tolerate the presence of any man, all her governmental functionaries, both high and low ranging from military commanders and ministers to carpenters and other petty craftsmen were women (Alli Arasani Kathai :1987:31). Even today among Tamilians an all female household is sarcastically referred to as '*Alli Rajyam*', literally '*the administration run by Alli*'. In some versions however, it is stated that Alli as a practical ruler did meet with foreign ambassadors or men in her kingdom in an official capacity, but disliked any man coming in front of her without her permission. Such an offence was punishable by death.

In response, to the man's extolling of Alli's beauty, Arjuna expresses his ardent desire to possess her :

When will I behold her
Embrace, and kiss her
The famed Parthiban languishes
When will we indulge in love play
How will I take her to bed
When will we become one? (*Alli Natakam* : 1967: 14)

Throughout this dialogue Arjuna's language is one of conquest and subjugation, not the language of love or caring.

The rest of the Alli ballad deals with the taming and domestication of Alli into a virtuous and obedient wife to Arjuna. Arjuna enters the Pandyan kingdom in the guise of an ascetic, presumably to hide his well known penchant for beautiful women. Even today a popular saying in the Tamil country is 'Arjuna sanyasi' meaning a sanctimonious humbug ! Arjuna tries to seduce Alli in various ways. He must however be seen to preserve patriarchal norms and marriage was and is considered a most important social norm. Thus, the poets who retold and reworked the Alli myth, emphasised the fact that Arjuna's seduction of Alli was followed by marriage. Arjuna cheats the man hating Alli by penetrating her bedroom in the form of a beautiful snake given to her by Krishna in disguise. Alli in her innocence plays with the snake which eventually hypnotises her. The imaging of Arjuna as the seductive and aggressive male snake indicates the use of very powerful sexual imagery. A graphic description in the Alli Kadai says that the love play of Arjuna drained Alli of all her resistance making her feel drugged with passion. Thus, Arjuna seduces Alli without her knowledge or consent. The process of taming Alli by a patriarchal hero is thus set into motion with the sexual conquest of Alli resulting in the loss of virginity which was believed to be the source of her power.

A series of events act as forerunners to this seduction of Alli by

Arjuna. In a farcical scene, Arjuna becomes a transvestite taking on the name of Chengamalam and Alli is fooled into believing she has a female companion. Once Alli goes hunting to the forest with her friends when Arjuna ensures that she is caught alone with him. Expressing his sympathy with deep cunning Arjuna massages Ali's tired body. His disguise is so effective that the queen despite the curious emotions which are aroused by his touch does not discover his real sex. This is of course not the first instance of transvestism for Arjuna. In the Virata Parva of Mahabharata when all the Pandava brothers and their wife Draupadi adopt disguises, Arjuna chooses to become the female eunuch, Brahannala, who becomes the dance instructor in the harem. In the Alli ballad, Arjuna while pressing Alli's feet, gently takes away her ring without her knowledge. It is only when he begins to narrate the story of the Pandava princes and the many virtues of Arjuna that Alli suddenly discovers that she had spent long and intimate hours in the company of a man. Arjuna manages to escape from a furious and humiliated Alli at this juncture.

The *Alli Arasani Malai* is a ballad which deals with the gradual taming of Alli to fit the patriarchal role model of a woman. The transformation of Alli from a valorous ruler to a tame housewife constitutes the climax of all the various extant versions of the Alli myth.

A popular Tamil saying is that 'One can even count the stars in the sky but not the wives of Arjuna'. In fact, in the *Alli Natakam*, Arjuna in the guise of Chengamalam boasts of his charms and says :

He is the only fitting husband

For women born and to be born!

(*Alli Natakam*: 1967: 23)

He achieves the ultimate 'triumph' over Alli when he secretly ties the 'Tali' the yellow thread symbolizing a woman's marital status in South Indian tradition around Alli's neck and she conceives the same night. Alli is furious and outraged and wants to murder Arjuna. However, at this point, she is made to realize by her women companions that she is now a married woman and as a would be mother she has no option but to submit to the will of Arjuna. Pugazhendi Pulavar, the 16th century author of *Alli Arasani Malai* holds up the submission of Alli to Arjuna as a moral lesson which all right thinking women should draw—that a woman's ultimate destiny is fulfilled only as a wife and a mother. With the changeover from being a 'castrated male' to a 'chaste wife' Alli's transformation is complete. The extent to which patriarchy and Brahminization has seeped into Tamil society is demonstrated by the fact that 'Alli' is a term used in common parlance for a eunuch!. The moral is obvious. A bold and courageous woman,

however beautiful, cannot be regarded as feminine or even as female.

The story of Alli after her marriage to Arjuna is continued in three related ballads—*Pavazhakkodi Malai*, *Pulandaran Kalava Malai* and *Eni Etram*.

Pavazhakkodi was another princess, who became the victim of Arjuna's desire. The ballad begins with Alli's son Pulandaran crying for a toy chariot made of coral. The ballad says that the queen was helpless in the matter of fulfilling his wish. Arjuna however, set out in search of coral and came upon the princess Pavazhakkodi, literally the coral creeper, in the Themboor country. Arjuna who had seduced as a snake now entered the bedroom of Pavazhakkodi as a swan and made a conquest of her. Another wife of Arjuna called Minnoliyal refused to live with Arjuna because of her dislike of him. However, Draupadi invited all the wives of Arjuna for a feast at which Alli and Draupadi persuaded Minnoliyal to break her vow and fulfil her conjugal obligations towards Arjuna. It is clear that Alli had not only submitted to patriarchal norms but had become co-opted to the extent of enforcing these norms on other women.

A politically significant aspect of Arjuna's conquest, subjugation and subsequent co-option of the reluctant women in the various ballads woven around him, is that these women were either heirs to the throne or rulers of some kingdom or the other. Hence every instance of Arjuna's sexual triumph also constituted a political victory and the assimilation of one more independent kingdom (governed by a woman) into the Pandava empire.

The political and gender implications of the Alli legend becomes even more significant when one looks at the story of Chitrangada which has amazing parallels with the Alli legend. At some point the Chitrangada story enters the mainstream of the Mahabharat epic which carries a 'patriarchally acceptable' version of the legend. The legend seems to be located in the north east, in the tribal belt of Manipur or Tripura, which, like the ancient Tamils, again has a societal structure which may have been partially matriarchal or matrilineal. Chitrangada like Alli seems to have governed over a kingdom called Manalur which had an all female administration. The queen is described as a 'veerangana', a great warrior. It is said that Arjuna inadvertently entered the bedroom when his elder brother was enjoying the company of Draupadi, their common wife (the practice of polyandry is not unknown among certain tribal communities and continues to be a living custom among the Himachali tribals of Kinnaur). Arjuna is sent off into exile as a punishment for his untimely intrusion. It is at this time that he encounters and marries a Naga kanya (serpent princess)

called Ulupi and then enters the kingdom of Manalur where he is challenged to a battle by the queen Chitrangada. Manalur could probably be Manipur because even now the region is dominated by the Naga and the Kuki tribes. Another possibility is that the geographical location of Manalur could be south India from where it might have travelled to the east because the suffix 'Ur' is usually given to a non-Brahmin settlement in south India. The legend indicates that Chitrangada was a tribal chieftain/queen. Arjuna faces Chitrangada in battle not knowing that he is fighting with a woman and is defeated by her. However the legend goes on to say that the queen fell in love with Arjuna. Arjuna is totally repulsed by the "kuroopa" (ugly) figure and face of the valiant warrior. In order to win his love, Chitrangada prays to both Siva and Kamadeva (the God of Love) seeking their blessings to making her beautiful and attractive so that Arjuna will be drawn to her. Through prayers kuroopa Chitrangada becomes Suroopa ('the beautiful') Chitrangada. Arjuna falls in love with the now beautiful Chitrangada but fails to come to terms with her 'masculine' qualities of daring and courage. As with Alli, Chitrangada too is projected as an androgynous female who carries within her seeds of highly objectionable qualities such as lack of timidity (a very 'feminine' attribute) and enormous ability for governance. In fact the ballads about Chitrangada stress the fact that Manalur was a perfectly governed land where no acts of crime or injustice took place. The love story of Chitrangada ends at the point where Arjuna marries her, giving her a male child whom they name Babruvahana and then abandons her. The legend itself ends when Arjuna returns to the same land after many years only to be challenged in battle and killed by his own son. Chitrangada with the help of another wife of Arjuna's, Ulupi, brings back her husband to life. When the legend of Chitrangada enters mainstream Mahabharata she is firmly entrenched in the patriarchal mode by having her serve Kunti and Panchali and live amicably ever after with the many wives of Arjuna. This is exactly what happens to Alli Rani after she goes through the process of patriarchal taming. She not only subscribes to the rules of patriarchy herself but is co-opted into a complicitous role as in *Alli Kadai and Pavalakkodi Malai*.

The Pulandaran Kalavu Malai is the third of the Alli trilogy and deals with the marriage of Pulandaran. The marriage was between cross cousins in which Pulandaran, the son of Alli, marries Duryodhana's sister's daughter. The son of Alli and Arjuna is unacceptable to the Kauravas and the resultant tensions and their resolution forms the theme of this ballad.

The Alli myth is again central to the ballad of Eni Etram which also

dovetails into the Mahabharata epic. In this story Duryodhana the Kaurava prince, and the arch enemy of the Pandavas falls in love with the princess Subhadra. Subhadra is Krishna's sister and became one of the chief wives of Arjuna. Alli is furious that Duryodhana should dare to covet a woman who was Arjuna's prized possession. When Duryodhana comes to Madurai Alli and her woman advisors fool him into believing that Subhadra returns his love. The love struck Duryodhana dances and sings and is mocked at and ultimately humiliated by Alli (A.N. Nallaperumal: 1987: 109-10ff). This ballad shows the degree of Alli's complicity in aiding and abetting Arjuna in his romantic exploits and in preserving his self image as a great husband. She is willing to go to any extent either to procure a new wife for Arjuna or to protect his exclusive right over his existing wives.

To conclude, the recovery of women's voices from myths and histories which are largely patriarchal in their scope and content, can be attempted in two ways. One method is to bring the marginalised, what we today call 'subaltern' figures centre stage. This is basically a salvage operation since women in patriarchal texts and myths have been imaged in terms of stereotypes shaped by Brahminical canons. Thus Indian feminists both men and women have re-opened these texts to focus on Draupadi, Gandhari and Madhavi. Such studies highlight victim consciousness without however getting out of the essentially patriarchal framework of women as victim and man as victimiser or alternatively woman either as Goddess or demoness.

The second method is to look at a myth which is essentially outside the patriarchal framework. What I have attempted in this presentation is to take up the story of Alli, a cult figure of Ancient Tamil society which was initially matrilineal and therefore at variance with the Brahminical-patriarchal discourse. Alli was a product of the Tamil social structure in which women moved freely between the private and the public domain. Tamil women played an equally important role with the men in the economic sphere specially in agriculture and dairy farming. Socially women moved freely among men and had the freedom to choose the man they wanted to marry. It was in this historical context that Alli evolved. Eventually as Tamil society came under Brahminical-Sanskritic influence the historical transition gets reflected in the patriarchal taming of the Alli legend.

Despite the taming of Alli, the myth essentially falls outside the patriarchal story framework. This can be seen in terms of the audience impact of the Alli legend. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Alli has been the favourite theme of many dramatic groups since the portrayal of the character of Alli was considered the greatest challenge

to the theatre company as well as its 'male' thespian. (Until the mid twentieth century it was customary for men to play women characters). With the coming of the cinema, as many cinematic versions of 'Alli' appeared as there were of chaste heroines like Kannagi. The Tamil film 'Alli Rani' with S.Varalakshmi in the lead role, the film 'Pavalakkodi' with T.R. Rajakumari and the more diluted version 'Rani Chengamalam' acted by Savitri Ganesan shows that 'Alli' had a fascination for the Tamil audience. Yet this fascination for the daring and deviant female apparently did not extend to her acceptance in orthodox homes. Neelambikai Ammaiyar, the celebrated daughter of Marai Malai Adigal and the founder of the Anti-British, Anti-Congress movement Tani Tamizh Iyakkam writes in her essay 'Muppenmanigal Varalaru' (the Life of Three Women):

Women should not be permitted to read texts like, *Alli Arasanikkovai Pavalakkodi Malai, Eni Etram* etc. which may lead them into bad ways (emphasis mine). They do not only read such texts day and night but also read books (Brahmanical Sanskrit texts) like *Kaivalya Navaneetam* which are false doctrines.

Neelambikai Ammaiyar's statement indicates on the one hand the patriarchal responses to the Alli myth which was regarded as corrupting and subversive. At the same time her fears about the subversive influence of these texts on the women who read them "night and day" shows that the notion of women's freedom and the urge to carve out one's own spaces independent of the ubiquitous patriarchal male, did exercise the imagination of girls/women who showed a penchant for the Alli ballads.

This presentation has highlighted the transformational process in the context of the historical mutations of the Alli myth. The paper has also endeavoured to show that despite the taming of Alli and the patriarchal appropriation of the Alli myth, it has continued to excite the popular imagination of women as an alternate role model for women.

NOTES

1. Cited in T.S.Rukmani, 'Folk Traditions Related to the Mahabharata in South India' in K.S.Singh, ed., *The Mahabharat in the Tribal and Folk Traditions of India*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1993, p. 195.
2. The most detailed study on the Draupadi cult is by Alf Hildebeital, *The Cult of Draupadi: Mythologies from Gingee to Kurukshetra*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1988.
3. The changing status of women in Tamil society with the growth of Brahmanisation

- and a transforming economic order is discussed in my article: 'The Kudi in Early Tamilaham and the Tamil Women' in Dev Nathan, ed., *From Tribe to Caste*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1997, pp. 223-45.
4. A brief reference to Mudinmagalir is to be found in my article, 'Aspects of Women and Work in Early South India', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XXVI, No. 1, Jan-March, 1989, p. 97.
 5. T.N.Subramaniam, *Sangam Polity*.
 6. Proceedings of the First International Conference of Tamil Studies, Kuala Lumpur Malaysia, 1966, pp. 352-461.
 7. Cited in H.W.Thambiah, 'Pre-Aryan Customary Laws', op.cit, p. 356.
 8. Second edition, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune, 1973, vol. III, pp. 647; 657-59.
 9. Thani Nayagam, X.S, *Tamil Culture and Civilization*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1970, p. 6.
 10. *Alli Kadai*, E. Sundaramoorthy, ed., Madras University, Chennai, 1989. The verse (on p. 25) goes:

Seeing Alli that most handsome of men, Vijayan of the famed bow
fell prostrate like a coconut tree cut at its roots...
Mayan (Krishna) gathered him into his arms while Alli
ran up in haste and said 'blow the breath of dry ginger upon his face'.
 11. Tiruvilaiyadal Puranam: 1.4.25 cited in William P. Harman, 'How The City Became Sacred: Madurai' in "The Story of Siva's Sacred Games", *Journal of Tamil Studies*, 31 June, 1987, International Institute of Tamil Studies, pp. 1-17.
 12. *Alli Kadai*: verses: 1035 to 1940.
 13. See Puranic Dictionary ed Vettam Mani, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 1964
 14. The essay 'Muppenmanigal Varalaru' is contained in Neelambikai Ammaiyar's collection of essays published in 1940 called *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal* published by the Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam, Madras. See pp. 26-27 for the above comment by her.

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* All translations of verses from the Alli story in this paper are by the author.