The Taming of Alli [1]

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ABSTRACT

The story of Alli figures in the Tamil version of the Mahabharata. She is described as a type of "Amazonian" beauty, a vehement hater of men. In the zigzag movement of the Alli legend through space and time, the heroine Alli as well as the Alli myth get tamed and subsumed into the patriarchal register.

RÉSUMÉ

L'histoire d'Alli figure dans la version tamile de Mahabharata. Elle est décrite comme un genre de beauté "amazonienne," une femme qui a une haine véhémente envers les hommes. Dans le zigzag de la légende d'Alli à travers l'espace et le temps, l'héroïne Alli ainsi que le mythe d'Alli sont apprivoisés et subsumés dans le registre patriarcal.

Myths and legends are not frozen in time. This article looks at the changing perceptions of women in Tamil society and the imaging of Tamil women within the male patriarchal register, focusing on the transformational qualities of myths. I contextualize some leading Tamil myths that 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. In the process of its transmissions and transmutations, the myth does not follow a linear course but tends to zigzag between the image of women within the indigenous Tamil tradition and their absorption into the Brahmanic patriarchal stereotyping of women. Alli, a popular ballad among Tamils for over one thousand five hundred years, goes through a metamorphosis in the course of four related narratives: *Alli Arasani Malai, Pavazhakkodi, Eni Etram* and *Purandaran Kalavu.*

Multiple texts of all these ballads exist, including stage and cinema versions, some dating back to the early twentieth century, and this article traces the zigzag movement of the Alli myth through the quartet of narratives as oral (popularly sung) ballads, versions published at various points of time in history, authored by poets who have provided their own twist to the Alli tale, and

dramatised versions of Alli both on stage and on screen. The available multiple texts, however, by and large represent the voice of patriarchy. Although the nature and content of the Alli myth(s) suggest a non-patriarchal origin, there are no extant versions that have not been diluted by "patriarchal taming." Therefore the recovery of the non-patriarchal Alli has to be done by fragmenting the mega-narrative of the "*Mahabharata* Alli" and examining the sub-text of these versions.

TAMIL WOMEN AND A *MAHABHARATA* MYTH

This inclusion of a myth from the *Mahabharata* is an attempt to contextualize the process of transmission and transmutation of a great epic that may have had its birth in the non-Sanskritic early Tamil society. 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: "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."[2]

The *Mahabharata* epic is located primarily in Northern India, with the main action centres - Indraprastha, Hastinapura and Kurukshetra - situated geographically in the present Indian states of Delhi and Haryana. Yet this great epic crossed the Vindhya mountain ranges in Central India fairly early and reached the Tamil country during the early Christian era corresponding to the Sangam period of the Tamils (roughly 3rd century BC to 3rd century AD). Draupadi, the polyandrous queen of *Mahabharata* emerged as a major folk deity in the Tamil country.[3] Fire walking is an important ritual of the Draupadi cult. The Tamils not only brought to center stage the avenging woman Draupadi, but also interspersed the story of Alli, the Amazonian queen, within the *Mahabharata*, which resulted in the transmutation of what appears to be a local myth. It is significant that Alli Rani (Queen Alli) herself does not move into the greater *Mahabharata* tradition. Instead it is the great epic which moves southwards, absorbing 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 Sanskritic North Indian versions of the epic.

SITUATING ALLI IN TAMIL SOCIETY

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 Sanskritic, Brahmanical tradition, which makes its presence in South India towards the latter part of the Sangam age (*Kadai Sangam*). This cultural encounter was a long drawn process. Caste hierarchies were not indigenous to early Tamil societies which consisted of *kudi*, a generic term meaning inhabitants. The *kudi* were economically stratified in terms of occupational differences but there were no caste hierarchies as such.[4] The Sangam poet Avvaiyar, a low born *Virali* (minstrel) of the Panar caste, talks of 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 Mudinmagalir or the valorous women who feature time and again in such Sangam anthologies as *Pattupattu, Purananuru*, and *Ahananuru*. The *Mullaipattu* describes women carrying shining spears. T.N. Subramaniam, the historian of the Sangam age, points out that women bodyguards of the king were called *urimai surtram* and 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 such early Tamil practices as romantic unions, marriages following elopement, etc. He authenticates his statement on pre-Brahmanical customs by quoting the *Tolkappiyam*: "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 matrilinearity and the use of metronymic suffixes/prefixes was not confined to Malabar in ancient times but prevailed in some other parts of South India as well.[8] The eminent Tamil scholar Thaninayagam[9] comments 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*, the hilly tract in the ancient text *Tolkappiyam*, is present in the Alli stories.[10] 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-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 Brahmanization and Sanskritization. Brahmanical 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 marginalised women both ritually and socially. The act of giving birth as

well as her monthly menstrual cycles rendered a woman impure. Male canonical writers assigned ascriptive and prescriptive roles to women that 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 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 that 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. According to oral tradition, a woman founded the Pandyan kingdom. The Buddhist text *Mahavamsa* refers to a Pandyan queen who became the wife of Vijaya of Sri Lanka. Nilakanta Shastri in his book The *Pandyan Kingdom* suggests a possible connection with the story of Alli's marriage to Arjuna who is also known by the name of "Vijaya."[11] Even more seminal to the contextualisation of Alli in terms of gender and political power is the religious mythology that 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 the heroine Kannagi avenges the royal miscarriage of justice leading to her husband's execution by burning the city of Madurai. The city is described at length as the commercial and cultural heart of the country. 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 sacrifice. 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 *putra kameshti 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 *sthalapurana* (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 (three) breasts will disappear.[12]

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 date back to the indigenous traditions of the Pandiamandalam, the *putra kameshti yaga* which enabled her birth is entirely Brahmanical. Patriarchal values once again are 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 marries him. This alliance between Siva and Shakti, represented in the form of Meenakshi, made the Pandyan kingdom politically invincible since cosmic power was combined with secular power, the cementing of the sacred and the secular which has been the cornerstone of every instance of state formation in South India. The alliance, however, was slanted heavily in favour of

Meenakshi which is borne out by a popular saying in Tamil Nadu that 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 in 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 KADAI - THE STORY OF ALLI

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.[13] 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 sixteenth century poet Pughazhendi authored not only *Alli Arasani Malai* but also *Pavazhakkodi Malai, Pulandaran Kalava Malai* and *Eni Etram*, all of which are ballads related to the myth of Alli. Chennai B. Ratna Nayakar & Sons brought out a dramatic version of Alli called *"Alli Natakam"* which was staged beginning in the early part of the twentieth century but went into print later (Tirumagal Press, Madras 1967).

Alli was the only child of a Pandyan king who is not located in chronological time nor identified by name. It is said that Alli's was an immaculate conception since she was found on an "alli" flower at the conclusion of the performance of the *"putra kameshti yaga"* (a sacrifice performed to beget a child) and was not conceived naturally. The recurrence of the notion of immaculate conception in the myths of both Alli and Perarasiyar[14] (the myth of Perarasiyar or Purushan Devi is a similar ballad from the Trivandrum region) 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 and concomitant ideas of marriage and female sexuality, immaculate conception would tie in with their social non-conformism.

The girl child Alli was sent to the Gurukula (traditional school) like any young man and became proficient in riding and the martial arts. The parallel with goddess Meenakshi who is also said to have been proficient in both martial arts and in hunting is striking. 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. He is said to be the son born to a waterfowl (who had been a prostitute in a previous birth) transformed into a pregnant woman by the blessings of Siva and Parvati. He was planted in the household of the childless Pandyan king who adopted him. The king suffered from a curse that he would have no children. Leaving Neenmugan in the palace, the royal couple performed penance and sacrifice for a progeny. Alli was the result of their prayers.

When the couple tried to return to Madurai with their daughter Alli, they found that Neenmugan had usurped the throne acting on his mother's advice and they had been exiled. When the Pandyan king sought refuge with his father-in-law who ruled over a tiny principality, the vengeful Neenmugan declared war on the state, demanding tribute. The text of *"Alli Kadai"* (verse: 45, canto I) says that Alli defied the tyrant and successfully led the army against him. Madurai itself acquired fame and glory because the valorous Alli destroyed the tyrant Neenmugan. Alli was subsequently crowned ruler of Madurai. The female heir Alli is clearly being preferred to the male heir Neenmugan who is imaged as villainous and greedy for power.

The story of Alli thus commences with her vanquishing in battle an incompetent male 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 assumption of power, although eventually taking a very different trajectory, with the subsuming of Alli's unbridled power into the patriarchal fold.

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!
(*Pavazhakkodi Malai* of Pugazhendi
Pulavar 1975, 4)

In the dramatised version of Alli - *Alli Natakam* - she is shown as a militant hero with a long sword dangling by her side (Opening scene: The stage entrance of Alli). An interesting aspect of the stage right up to the third decade of the twentieth century was that men performed all female roles since women were not allowed to act (similar to the pre-restoration theatre in England). Male actors who habitually performed female roles had the prefix "streepart" attached to their name. More often they were known by the female role they excelled in such as Valli (the gypsy who became the divine consort of Lord Murugan), Vaithiyanatha Iyer, Nallatangal,[15] T.S. Kannusami and Alli Paramesvara Iyer. In the context of the imaging of Alli this fact takes on significance because it is so much easier for a man to portray masculine qualities such as those attributed to Alli, the "female king."[16] The patriarchal twist to the imaging of Alli Rani (Rani literally means queen) lies in the fact that the more ferocious her depiction, the more telling is the message derived from her taming.

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, or 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, would be 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 (synonym for Arjuna) 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 was the exemplar of masculinity in the Hindu register because his romantic encounters culminated in marriage. A popular saying in Tamil is: "One can even count the stars in the sky but not the many wives of Arjuna." In the *Alli Natakam*, Arjuna indulges in sexual foreplay with Alli in the guise of a transvestite calling himself Chengamalam. He also tells her:

> Arjuna is the only fitting husband
> For women born and yet to be born (!)
> *(Alli Natakam* 1967, 23)

Arjuna cheats the man-hating Alli by entering her bedroom in the form of a beautiful snake given to her by Krishna in the disguise of a Brahmin.[17] 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 metaphor. In the version written by Pugazhendi Pulavar it is said that Arjuna indulged in love play as Siva did with Parvati, as Murugan did with Valli.

> He rolled on her in the bed spread with saffron
> Like a mustard seed on polished mirror
> Like a bee fastening itself to a jasmine flower
> *(Alli Arasani Malai* 106)

A picturesque description in the *Alli Kadai* says that the love play of Arjuna drained Alli of all her resistance making her feel drugged with passion.[18] 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. Alli realises that Arjuna's rape has also conferred the burden of motherhood upon her. The consequent submission of Alli takes different forms in the different versions. In the stage version the play ends when Alli gracefully bows to her husband

and the other Pandava brothers who have by now reached Madurai and Gods shower their blessings on their union. However the submission is not so tame in the *Alli Arasani Malai* in which Alli is said to have fought a war with the Pandavas before capitulating.

The different versions of the Alli story deal more or less similarly with the theme of outraged modesty and royal fury which characterises Alli's reaction to Arjuna's amorous advances. It is said that Arjuna wore the garb of a rejected lover and resorted to the practice of *madal erudal* to proclaim his love in public (*Alli Arasani Malai* 78-79). This was an ancient Tamil practice referred to in Sangam literature where the lover rides a donkey and laments aloud his beloved's cruelty. Often the *madal* ended in tragedy as the spurned suitor was expected to commit suicide. Alli is shown to be vicious in her wrath. She orders Arjuna to be poisoned by snakes, dragged through burning sands and crushed by an elephant. When he survives all these ordeals she decides to offer him as a human sacrifice to her patron goddess. *Alli Natakam* has a graphic description of Arjuna being led to the sacrificial block and the goddess refusing the sacrifice in indignation by saying how could Alli, who hated men, expect that her patron deity would accept a male offering (42-46). Pugazhendi Pulavar, however, does not refer to the human sacrifice incident.

Irrespective of the trajectories they may take, the Alli ballads have as their common thrust, the gradual taming of Alli to fit the patriarchal role model of an ideal woman/wife. 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. Pugazhendi Pulavar, the sixteenth 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 Brahmanization has seeped into Tamil society is demonstrated by the fact that "Alli" is a term used in common parlance for a eunuch! The term is also used in middle class homes for young girls behaving like "tom boys." On a

personal note, I remember being told in my childhood "not to act like Alli." The moral is obvious. A bold and courageous girl, 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 Kalavu 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 Alli 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.

Eni Etram is the story of how Alli avenges the humiliations heaped on the Pandavas by Duryodana and his audacious and immoral advances towards Subhadra, wife of Arjuna. She summons the best craft persons in her kingdom.[19] They are asked to fashion a ladder consisting of ten steps. The life-like images of the various queens of Arjuna, including Alli, Pavazhakkodi and Draupadi, were to be set up on each step with the image of Subhadra being placed right on top. Nails are ingeniously hidden in the ladder in order to fix Duryodana on it. Alli proclaims that her elaborate trap is intended to avenge the humiliations suffered by the Pandavas and Duryodana's audacity in disrobing Draupadi and coveting Subhadra.

Alli's meticulous plan is successfully carried out. The love struck Duryodhana is nailed on the ladder and is mocked and humiliated by Alli. She parades him through the streets of Madurai. He is finally spared his life at the intervention of Krishna. As with the other Alli ballads this one also

ends when the Pandava princes come to Madurai and Alli, the Pandyan queen, is united with Arjuna, the *Mahabharata* hero. 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 virile lover. Alli 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.

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 constitutes a political victory and the assimilation of one more independent kingdom (governed by a woman) into the Pandava empire.

Pulandaran Kalavu Malai is the sequel to 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 story of Pulandaran already finds mention in the *Eni Etram* when Sahadeva reports to his brother Alli's anger that Pulandaran's wife Kalandhari (Duryodana's sister Durjata's daughter) is seven months pregnant but forcibly kept prisoner by Duryodana. Alli is not allowed to perform *seemantham* for her daughter-in-law, which is an essential ritual for childbirth. On the contrary, Kalandhari is accused of immoral conduct and condemned to death. Unlike the other Alli ballads which are largely located in Madurai and nearby, in *Pulandaran Kalavu Malai* Alli invades Hastinapur and rescues Kalandhari from a gruesome death. The ballad makes it clear that despite patriarchal taming, the image of Alli as a fearsome warrior and powerful ruler does not change.

To conclude, the recovery of women's voices from myths and histories that 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 Brahmanical canons. Thus, Indian feminists, both men and women, have re-opened these texts to focus on women like Draupadi, Gandhari and Madhavi. Such studies highlight victim consciousness without leaving out the essentially patriarchal framework of woman as victim and man as victimiser, or alternatively, woman as either Goddess or demoness.

The second method is to look at a myth that 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 matrilocal and therefore at variance with the Brahmanical patriarchal discourse. Alli was a product of the Tamil social structure in which women moved without constraint between the private and the public domain. Tamil women played an equally important role with men in the economic sphere, especially 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 Brahmanical Sanskritic influence, the historical transition got 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 a theatre company and its "male" thespian.

With the coming of the cinema, as many versions of "Alli" appeared as there were icons of chastity like Kannagi and Savitri. The Tamil film "Alli Arjuna" (1935) with K.S. Ananthanarayana Iyer in the lead role, the film "Pavazhakkodi" with T.P.Rajalakshmi in the 1930 version and S.D. Subbalakshmi in the 1934 version enacting the role of Alli, were the earliest cinematic representations. "Vanarani" (1935) and "Vindhyarani" (1950) with Garikipati Varalakshmi in the lead role were thinly veiled versions of the story of Alli Rani. "Alli Vijayam," meaning "The Triumph of Alli," was released in 1942 and its historical relevance lay in India's freedom struggle when Indian patriots used the cinematic mode to protest against British imperialism, in this instance imaging Alli as a kind of Joan of Arc. Alli continued to retain her popularity on the Tamil silver screen - "Alli" (1964); "Alli Durbar" literally "The Court of Alli" (1978) and "Alli Petra Pillai" (Actually the story of Alli's son Pulandaran) in 1979. The recent box office hit "Alli Arjuna" is proof of Alli's enduring appeal. Pavazhakkodi (which is part of the Alli trilogy) similarly has multiple cinematic versions (1931;1934;1949) including the one produced by Tamil Nadu's ex-Chief Minister, M.Karunanidhi ("Mandirikumari" in 1950).

This article has highlighted the transformational process in the context of the historical mutations of the Alli myth. The "Taming of Alli" is two-pronged - as character and as text. The endeavour draws from alternative sources such as folk ballads, which truly reflect cultural memories, to suggest a dialogic representation of women in historical Tamil society. Patriarchal taming of a non-patriarchal folk tradition results in tensions that cause mutations in the Alli ballad through time and possibly through space. The article concludes on the note that despite the taming of Alli and the patriarchal appropriation of the Alli myth, it has continued to excite the popular imagination of Tamils as an alternate role model.

SELECTED TEXTS OF THE ALLI MYTH

Alli Natakam (in Tamil) published by Chennai: B. Rattina Naickar and Sons, 1967.

Alli Arasani Malai (in Tamil) of Pugazhendi Pulavar, Chennai: R.G. Pati Company, 1972.

Alli Arasani Kadai (in Tamil) edited by the Manimekalai Press Editors Committee headed by L.N. Tamizhvanan, Chennai: Manimekalai Press, 1987.

Alli Kadai (in Tamil) ed. Dr. E. Sundaramurthy, Chennai: Madras University, 1989.

Pavlakodi Natakam, (in Tamil) Chennai: B.Rattina Naickar and Sons, 1963.

Pavalakodi Malai, (in Tamil) Chennai: R.G.Pati and Company, 1975.

Duryodanan Tunbapatta Eni Etra Natakam, (in Tamil) Chennai: B.Rattina Naickar and Sons, 1971.

T.C. Gomati Nayagam, *Tamizh Villu Padalgal*, (in Tamil) Adayar: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1979.

Pennarasiyar Kadai (The Valourous Virgins) (in both Tamil and English), ed. K. Jayakumar and D.M. Moominaganathan; tr.by S. Mark Joseph, Madras: Institute of Asian Studies, Chimmanacherry, 1996.

ENDNOTES

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

2. Cited in T.S.Rukmani, "Folk Traditions Related to the *Mahabharata* in South India," *The Mahabharat in the Tribal and Folk Traditions of India* , K.S.Singh, ed. Shimla: The Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1993, p.195.

3. The most detailed study on the Draupadi cult is by Alf Hiltebeital, *The Cult of Draupadi: Mythologies from Gingee to Kurukshetra*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988.

4. The changing status of women in Tamil society with the growth of Brahmanisation and a transforming economic order is discussed in Vijaya Ramaswamy: "The Kudi in Early Tamilaham and the Tamil Women from Tribe to Caste," *From Tribe to Caste*, Dev Nathan, ed. Shimla: The Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1997, pp. 223-45.

5. T.N.Subramaniam, *Sangam Polity*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966, p.289.

6. The article is published in the *Proceedings of the First International Conference of Tamil Studies*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1966, pp. 352-61.

7. cited in H.W.Thambiah, "Pre-Aryan Customary laws," ibid., p.356.

8. P.V.Kane, *History of Dharmashastras*, Vol III, Second edition, Poone: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1973, pp. 647; 657-59.

9. Thani Nayagam, X.S. *Tamil Culture and Civilization*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1970, p.6.

10. Kutrala Kuravanji, dealing with the life of gypsies, is itself a very important musical genre of story-telling found in the Tamil country.

11. K.A.Nilakanta Shastri, *The Pandyan Kingdom*. London: Luzac and Co., London, 1929, p. 14 and fn.4. Shastri cites Geiger's translation of the *Mahavamsa*, pp. 59 and 61.

12. *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*, (31st June, 1987): 1-17.

13. The story of Alli is not the only myth that 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.

14. The myth of Perarasiyar is provided in Note 13. However this myth is confined to the areas which come under the erstwhile Travancore State. It therefore does not lend itself to the kind of study that is possible with the wide spread legend of Alli.

15. Nallatangal is another woman centred ballad from Tamil Nadu, which narrates the tragic suicide of an impoverished young widow. Her ballad is still remembered in Tamil Nadu by women wearing green (why green?) to commemorate the death of Nallatangal.

16. A woman ruler within the patriarchal set-up has necessarily to be portrayed as a "Female King." See for instance Cynthia Talbot's article, "Rudramma Devi, the Female King: Gender and Political Authority in medieval India" in *Syllables of Sky,* David Shulman, ed. OUP, 1995.

17. In the dramatised version *Alli Natakam,* the metamorphosis of Arjuna into a snake is changed for the obvious reason that a seductive snake cannot be depicted on the stage. Instead he enters her bedroom as a hapless Brahmin widow and eventually seduces her (*Alli Natakam: penultimate scene,* pp. 66-67).

18. *Alli Kadai:* verses: 1035 to 1940.

19. In *Alli Kadai* it is clearly stated that these artisans were women. One can presume that this situation continues in "Eni Etram." However in the dramatised version these are men for the obvious reason that it saved the producers the difficult task of arranging for "streepart" actors.