

## STATE OF THE FIELD

# PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN AND WORK IN PRE-COLONIAL SOUTH INDIA\*

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*Until a few decades ago, most labour histories did not bother to address women as workers in the domestic or public domain who contributed to a household income or the overall economy. Patriarchal spaces of historical discourse rendered women invisible (or effected distortions) that can only be contested by a rigorous study of women's unrecorded presence in the economy of the household and the broader domain of production. This article is an effort to understand the "being" and "doing" of women, and to map the interrelations of women and work over a vast historical span of time, beginning with women's writings on the theme of women and work and going on to plot women's agency historically in labour processes. In order to make the historical evidence more cohesive, it has been written with special reference to Peninsular India, while also drawing comparisons from the regions to the north of the Vindhya mountains that geographically and culturally mark the north–south divide.*

"Women live like bats and owls, labour like beasts and die like worms"  
(Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle, c. CE 1660)<sup>†</sup>

Feminist historians have written much about the absence of women from histories. Contributions by women, either in the domestic or the public domain (i.e. as workers contributing to the household income or the overall economy), remain unmarked within the patriarchal register. Even more offensive to women's sensibilities is the merely partial, or worse distorted, inclusion of women in historical spaces. Enforced invisibility or distorted visibility within patriarchal histories can only be challenged through the rigorous study of women's unrecorded presence in the economy of the household as well as the broader domain of production.

This article is an effort to understand the "being" and "doing" of women; in other words, to map the interrelationships of women and work over a vast historical span of time, beginning with women's writings on the theme of women and work and then going on to plot

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† Quoted in Woolf 1974, p. 93.

historically the agency of women in labour processes. Special reference will be made to Peninsular India, for the sake of making the historical evidence more cohesive. I will also draw comparisons with the regions to the north of the Vindhya mountains, the geographical and cultural marker of the north–south divide. This article concludes on the threshold of colonialism.

In the context of Indian history, one of the earliest pieces to be written on women and work was by Mary Francis Billington, in the 1890s.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, among the predictable chapters on “Her Marriage”, “Embroidery and Needlecraft” and “Jewellery and Ornaments”, the author also includes a chapter on “Female Life in Field and Factory”, a theme that, ironically, one cannot hope to find in many of the conventional history books of the twentieth century.

There are scattered references to women’s work in many Hindu canonical texts. Clarisse Bader picks up some of this information in order to bolster the image of glorious Indian womanhood she promoted in her book *Women in Ancient India: Moral and Literary Studies*, written in French in 1867.<sup>3</sup> Bader offers the examples of Vispala, who showed her bravery in battle, and of Brahmanical women who “laboured” in collecting for Vedic sacrifices *kusa* grass and the *soma* plant.<sup>4</sup> Buddhist texts, and to some extent administrative tracts such as Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, make reference to women’s labour. A recent book that seeks to assemble some of this evidence is Anil K. Tyagi’s *Women Workers in Ancient India*.<sup>5</sup> Tyagi devotes much space to the *paricharika* or *karmakari* (indicating domestic servants) as well as female slaves called *dasis*, pointing out that perhaps because slaves were expensive, employers preferred free labour.<sup>6</sup> The servant was supposed to do chores such as the sweeping and swabbing, bathe/massage the master or mistress, apply scents, wash their feet, fetch water from the well or the river, clean the rice and wash the dishes. Sometimes the status of the *paricharika* was almost synonymous with that of the *dasi*. This female servant literally and figuratively turned into a commodity: in one Buddhist text, a description of Visaka, *ithi bhandanam uttamam*, could be translated as “this is a high-quality commodity”.<sup>7</sup> The story of Jabala in the *Chandogya Upanishad* provides another case in point. So many men sexually exploit the *paricharika* that she is at a loss as to know which is the father of her child. Buddhist literature also contains references to women hawkers, oil and liquor sellers; the text *Boghasamharapeta*, for example, says that four women hawkers were caught using false weights.<sup>8</sup> Scattered references to women in Jain societies pertain particularly to the lower castes of women, including wet nurses, attendants, messengers and the inevitable courtesan.<sup>9</sup>

2 Billington 1973.

3 Bader 1964 (originally published 1925).

4 Uma Chakaravarti reads Clarisse Bader against the grain in her article in Sangari and Vaid 1989, pp. 44–45.

5 Tyagi 1994.

6 Tyagi 1994, p. 69.

7 Law 1981, p. 37.

8 Law, cited in Tyagi 1994, p. 63.

9 K. C. Jain, *Bodh aur Jain Sahitya me Nari Jeevan* (in Hindi) 1967, see Tyagi 1994, p. 28, fn. 1.

In the medieval period it is predominantly courtesans or prostitutes (termed sex-workers) that have attracted the attention of scholars of Mughal history. There are some notable exceptions. Shireen Moosvi has given attention to the theme of women and work in the pre-colonial period. As a historian of medieval India, Moosvi studies the theme of women and work in the age of the Mughals via evidence from Persian texts.<sup>10</sup> Irfan Habib, in his overview of gender history in Medieval India, has also looked briefly at women and work.<sup>11</sup> An unusual essay on this theme was Stephen Blake's "Contributors to the Urban Landscape: Women Builders in Safavid Isfahan and Mughal Shahjahanabad".<sup>12</sup>

## KITCHEN AS WOMAN'S PLACE: KITCHEN AS WOMAN'S SPACE

What does the kitchen signify for women – as work space and equally their personal and social place? It would be important, if one were to bring together the notion of "kitchen work" and "kitchen space", to understand ways in which these intimate places have been experienced and understood. A pioneering attempt on space was Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*.<sup>13</sup> Within the house (especially the kitchen) exist "worlds within worlds", what Bachelard terms "personal cosmoses". Although Bachelard's book does not explore the tantalizing possibilities of kitchen spaces, his keen observations can be extended to a gendered landscaping of the interior of the household. Historically, the kitchen is a place in which women create dishes, control and direct the pecking order, deftly handle the financial aspects of household requirements such as food provisions and, unsurprisingly, contest the intrusion of other women into that space. Conflicts of this sort typically involve a mother-in-law versus a daughter-in-law, or "co-wives", i.e. a wife and mistress.

*Manusmriti*, an ancient canonical text scholars date to a time between the second century BCE and the second century CE, can be regarded as a text illustrating the nature of the work that was assigned to women in traditional societies, work that obviously takes place within the household.<sup>14</sup> According to *Manusmriti* (generally translated into English as the "Laws of Manu"), a woman's main duties were as nurturer and provider, oriented towards taking care of her husband, children and the extended family.<sup>15</sup> In addition, she had to perform the physical work of drawing water from the well, churning, husking, winnowing and other such "homely" tasks.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Manu also credits her with a head for finance.

10 Moosvi 1994, pp. 105–16.

11 Habib 2000.

12 Hambley 1998.

13 Bachelard 1964 (French original in 1958).

14 *Manusmriti*, ed. Olivelle 2006, ch. 9, verses 10–12. See also *Manusmriti* (commentary by Kulluka) ed. Narayan 1946, ch. 9, verses 10–12.

15 *Manusmriti*, ed. Olivelle 2006, ch. 9, verse 27, p. 751.

16 *Ibid.*, ch. 9, verses 10–11, p. 748.

She had to manage the household on a daily basis and balance the family budget.<sup>17</sup> As the controller of her husband's earnings she was in charge of domestic finances and also acted as paymaster. *Manusmriti* points out that collecting and spending money was in the hands of the housewife because she was expected to be capable of exercising frugality.<sup>18</sup>

The *Manusmriti* is but an entry point to the nature of women and work in the context of Peninsular India. While it gives an indication of canonical thinking on the prescriptive role of women, in the case of South India contextual variations make it necessary to understand certain trajectories of the Sangam age (roughly datable from 300 BCE to CE 300, as with the *Manusmriti*); in short, the problem must be regarded as Peninsular rather than Indo-Gangetic.

## SANGAM TEXTS ON WOMEN'S WORK AND WOMEN'S ROLE

The "Karpiyal" of the *Tolkappiyam* is devoted entirely to prescribing the role of women. As with the *Manusmriti*, this normative text from the Sangam era, roughly contemporaneous with the *Manusmriti*, also emphasizes chastity, the qualities of mothering and nurturing as expected of an *illal* or *manaivi*. The very nomenclature used for a married woman in Tamil firmly locates her within interior spaces. The term for the wife, *illaval* (also called *illa kizhathi* and *illal*), is derived from the term *illam*,<sup>19</sup> for a house. The synonymous term *manaivi* is derived from the term *manaia*,<sup>20</sup> meaning "house", again referring to the housewife. An even more evocative term is *aham*,<sup>21</sup> which indicates interiority (for example as in *aham* poetry like *Ahananuru*) as well as, specifically, the house site. The word for wife, which is derived from *aham*, is *ahamudaiyal*, literally "she who is the mistress of the home".

Cooking, feeding, cleaning, etc. have been defined as the "unwaged" labour of the housewife. The Sangam text *Maduraikanchi*<sup>22</sup> states that *illara magalir*, literally "housewives", should wake up at dawn and sweep their homes. The *Nedunelvaadai* instructs them to light iron lamps with wicks soaked in clarified butter.<sup>23</sup> They, also, should commence their household chores at the crack of dawn. Such definitions of the housewife's space and the woman's place have been perceived by early feminist scholarship as a reflection of patriarchal oppression and the undervaluation of the woman's household labour.

17 The assumption that the wife is expected to handle the domestic expenses appears in quite a few of the verses from the *Manusmriti*. For example, verse 150 in Chapter 5 says, "she should be alert in the handling of household matters and tight-fisted in dealing with household expenditure" (here literally "tight-fisted", since the expression used is *amukta hastaya*), p. 588.

18 *Ibid.*, ch. 9, verse 10, p. 748. The exact line is "arthasya sangrahe cha enam vyaye".

19 *Kalittogai*, with commentary by Nachchinarkiniyar, ed Anantharaman 1925, verses 110: 12 and 94: 15; *Kurunthogai*, ed. Somasundaranar 1972, verse 8, and *Natrinai Nanuru*, ed. Narayananaswami 1967, verse 295.

20 *Kurunthogai* 1972, verse 181.

21 *Kurunthogai* 1972, verses 371–74.

22 *Maduraikanchi*, verse 664, see Vidyanandan 1954, p. 254.

23 *Nedunelvaadai*, 42, *ibid.*

More recent feminist debates, however, have opened up fresh ways of perceiving “domestic space”. In managing domestic space, a woman does not merely assert her agency but also achieves control and power. Hermeneutic analysis of the terms used for “housewife” in the Tamil language opens up some very interesting lines of discussion on the nature of power exercised by her, her control over the domestic space; in short, her agency. The potential power implied by Tamil terms for housewife ties these issues to a more general debate on the household space, linking with the work of feminist scholars exploring the notion of the domestic space of the housewife as an empowering space. For example, anthropologist Felicia I. Ekejiuba, writing about West African society, states:

The concept of the household as it is currently applied, is itself part of a subtle ideological transformation which has facilitated the assertion of colonial power, nationally, and male power domestically. The concept clouds the true pattern of gender interaction and power relations, portraying the impression of men as sole providers and of female dependence and passivity, as opposed to their active participation in socio-economic processes. . . .<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to the notion of “housewifization” and the passivity of the housewife, Ekejiuba offers the concept of a female-directed “hearth-hold” as a space that empowers women. The hearth-hold, it should go without saying, centres on the hearth or stove, the site at which a woman is responsible for a home’s food security.<sup>25</sup> This relates especially to the agricultural domain, where the woman controls and probably directs the “sharing of the grain heap” within the domestic space.

## Women and Farm Work

Sangam texts provide us with several instances of women’s participation in the rural economy, especially agriculture.<sup>26</sup> Weeding and planting (including the task of transplanting), guarding of the crops (exclusively the work for young, unmarried girls), and husking, winnowing and pounding (of the paddy) were all the tasks of women. Women also participated equally with men in the work of irrigation and harvesting. Konguvelir’s *Perunkadai*,<sup>27</sup> one of the five great Tamil epics (based on the Sanskrit *Brihatkatha*) composed during the post-Sangam period, states that women were particularly skilled in planting seeds. The *Perumpanatruppadai*<sup>28</sup> anthology gives a detailed description of the Eyrriyar women smoothing out and weeding the fields with furrows that had an iron tip called *kozhu*.<sup>29</sup> The Eyrriyar women in the post-Sangam era constituted low-caste agricultural labour, but for the period of this text (roughly datable between the second and fourth

24 Felicia Ekejiuba, in Bryceson ed., 1995, p. 50.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 47–61.

26 On classifying Sangam texts on the basis of historical blocks and locating women within these blocks, see my article in Nathan ed. 1997, pp. 223–28.

27 *Perunkadai*, stanza 1: 413, p. 234, stanza 1: 163–64, see Hanumanthan 1979, p. 100.

28 *Perumpanatruppadai*, in *Pathupattu*, lines 90–97.

29 *Perumpanatruppadai*, lines 90–97, see Ramaswamy 1989, pp. 81–99.

centuries CE) it is not clear whether they were working as agricultural labour or tilling their own land. The *Natrinai*<sup>30</sup> describes the Uzhavan and Uzhatti, a farming couple, leaving at dawn for their fields after having consumed a simple meal of rice gruel with fish. The term *uzhatti* carries with it some ambiguity, however, because it was not applied exclusively to the farming wife but also to a woman working as an agricultural labourer.

Folk songs relating to farm work provide a major source for an alternative history that meant to reconstruct the lives of women in Tamil society and economy. Interestingly, women's farming songs are also found in the Sangam literature itself. The *Malaipadukadam*<sup>31</sup> and the *Kurunthogai*<sup>32</sup> refer to women pounding the grain rhythmically, accompanied by song. This genre is called *vallai pattu*.

The technological transition from hoe agriculture to plough agriculture has been noted as an important marker in changing gender balance within the agricultural domain in the context of traditional Asian (and African) economies. This is a major component of the arguments raised by Ester Boserup in her discursive analysis of *Women's Role in Economic Development*.<sup>33</sup> Boserup discusses how the coming of the plough resulted in the marginalization of women, particularly in the traditional Asian economy:

The main farming instrument in those regions, the plough, is used by men helped by draught animals, and only the hand operations – or some of them – are left for women to perform. . . . The land is prepared for sowing by men using draught animals, and this thorough land preparation leaves little need for weeding the crop, which is usually the women's task. Therefore women contribute mainly to harvest work and to the care of domestic animals. . . . Sometimes such women perform only purely domestic duties, living in seclusion within their own homes and appearing in the village street only under the protection of the veil, a phenomenon associated with plough culture, and seemingly unknown in regions of shifting cultivation where women do most of the agricultural toil.<sup>34</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that the evidence of the Sangam texts could itself be divided into three historical blocks that indicate a gradual transition from a society in which women were co-sharers with men in most farming activities to a patriarchal society in which women (along with the lower castes) came to be marginalized.<sup>35</sup> In literary terms this change can be detected in the movement from the *Ettutogai* anthology to the *Pathupattu* anthology. The eventual emergence of a patriarchal structure can be roughly assigned to the period between the fifth and seventh century CE, marked by the last block of Sangam texts called *Kizhkanakku*. The predominance of plough agriculture or settled cultivation, together with the gradual displacement of shifting cultivation based

30 *Natrinai*, stanza 60: 1–8.

31 *Malaipadukadam*, from the *Pathupattu*, 342.

32 *Kurunthogai*, verse 89: 1.

33 Boserup 2007, pp. 12–14 of the section “The Plough, the Veil and the Labourer”.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 13–15.

35 Ramaswamy 1997, pp. 223–46.

on the hoe in which women actively participated, resulted also in the gradual emergence of a patriarchal, caste-based society. Concepts of purity and pollution became increasingly important, with the consequence that women (because of their menstrual cycles) should not be allowed to handle the “sacred” plough. Women therefore came to be called *kalam toda magalir*, literally “women who do not touch the plough”.<sup>36</sup>

Between the Sangam/late-Sangam periods (late-Sangam or post-Sangam period, which can be situated between the third century CE to the fifth century CE), and the beginnings of a medieval state under the Pallava and Chola dynasties (around the eighth century), a major shift occurred in production organization. A new production system resulted from the movement of Tamil society from a loosely stratified clan- and kinship-labour-based production system to a much more economically stratified, socially and ritually hierarchical society dominated by Brahmanical ideology and *brahmadeya* land systems. This system was based increasingly on the exploitation of labour performed by landless lower castes such as the Pallar, Kadaiyar, Tudiayar and Paraiyar. In epigraphical records there emerge new terms for servile labour, such as *kudiyar*, *vettiyal* and *muttal*.<sup>37</sup>

This shift had a major impact on the position of women and social perceptions of their labour: once regarded as co-sharers in farm work, women came to be perceived as domestic subordinates. The new (read non-Brahmanical/Brahminical upper-caste) cultural markers in society celebrated the “subordinated labour” of the woman as evidence of her virtuous commitment to her hearth, husband and children while at the same time rendering invisible her work-participation in the home. Increasingly, upper-caste women came to be confined to their domestic chores and extolled in their reproductive functions as producers of males. The iconization of the upper-caste/upper-class housewife in medieval canonical and literary texts – as chaste wife and self-sacrificing mother – goes hand in hand with her marginalization in the economic domain.

The contrasting impact of these changes on lower-caste women, *kadaiyiar* (translatable as “the lowest”) such as the Pallar and Paraiyar, is striking. While their labour was undervalued, they were brought into the public domain as waged workers. It seems likely that, in the case of lower-caste women from the medieval period onwards, some of women’s farm-related activities such as irrigating the fields, harvesting crops and the pounding of grain to the rhythmic music of the *vallai pattu* may have changed from unwaged to waged labour. While pounding of grain may have constituted a part of the “domestic” duties of women regardless of their status as upper or lower caste, it is likely that sometime in the medieval period this became a paid profession for low-caste/untouchable women. The *Periyapuranam*, a twelfth-century hagiographical text, refers to the Pulatti singing as she husks paddy while her husband the Pulayan was employed in the field.<sup>38</sup> The Pulaya and the Pulatti were clearly categorized as “polluted castes” associated with death, scavenging, etc. They were also invariably landless agricultural labourers. It can

36 *Purananuru*, 299, see Hanumanthan 1979, p. 32.

37 It is interesting that the term *muttal* (pronounced as in the English word *tall*) in Tamil today means “a stupid person”, in the same way that the medieval English term *vilain* (meaning *serf*), becomes transformed in modern parlance into *villain*, with the obvious implication that poverty breeds both ignorance and crime.

38 *Periyapuranam*, see Sastri 1975, pp. 568–69. The passage contains a brief description of Adananur village’s low-caste settlement where Nandanar lived.

therefore be inferred that landlords employed both the Pulayan and the Pulatti in agricultural labour; a similar inference can be made for the Parayan and his wife the Parchchi. This is the sense in which Chekkizhar uses the word *uzhatti* in the *Periyapuranam*: in the story of the Paraiya saint Nandanar, the poet describes the *uzhatti* as resting under a Marutu tree while her baby slept on a leather sheet.<sup>39</sup>

## Women and Farm Work in Tamil Folk Songs

Folk songs associated with women's work situations constitute an important source for mapping women's farm-related work. These folk songs specifically reflect the predicament of low-caste and/or destitute women (primarily widows with children) who had to labour for their survival. The *natru padal* (seed planting songs) and *etra padal* (water lifting songs) still can be heard in the Tamil Nadu countryside. In reconstructing the history of women and work, these songs form a major source of alternate history because most agricultural songs relate to women from the lower strata of society.<sup>40</sup>

Although one would locate the majority of upper-caste women as working within domestic spaces and secluded from the public gaze in what is classified as high literature (broadly canonical/Sanskritic), in fact there is a complete absence of the woman's voice. These women lacked access to the means of creating, disseminating and preserving their own history. As Maria Mies points out, the process of "housewifization" rendered women's (in the Indian context I would qualify this with "upper-caste" women) "unpaid" household work "invisible". She observes, "The construction of woman as mother, wife and housewife was the trick by which 50 per cent of human labour was defined as a free resource. It was female labour."<sup>41</sup> In contrast, the work songs (literally, *tozhil paadal*), part of Tamil folk tradition that includes voices of both lower-caste and destitute upper-caste women, provide us with a grassroots perspective of women's place in historical societies as perceived by women themselves.<sup>42</sup> In the case of women with infants, the task of working in the hot midday sun was rendered doubly painful. Take the following example, a cradle song that reflects this mood:

*While harvesting  
if I strap you to my shoulders  
in the noon-day heat  
will you not feel faint?  
While I work in the fields  
and leave you by the side  
will you not begin to cry?  
I am a low-paid labourer  
the overseer will be enraged*

39 *Periyapuranam*, 5: 22–24 and 6: 206–7, see Sastri 1975, pp. 568–69.

40 One does occasionally come across songs by upper-class rural women engaged in domestic chores in what is now described as "unpaid" or "unwaged" labour.

41 Mies 1998 (originally 1986), intro. p. ix.

42 Ramaswamy 1993, pp. 113–29.



*and if the overseer were to scold  
will not my child feel sad.*<sup>43</sup>

The work of lifting water for the agricultural fields was performed either by bullocks or by women (the equating of animal power with woman power is interesting) in a process that entailed moving up down a plank in order to rotate the wheel with the chain of buckets. The tedious work of lifting water required enormous staying power, which was to be found only in draught animals and women. This set of *etra padalgal* are sung by women, and punctuated by the rhythm of the buckets being drawn up. A woman sings<sup>44</sup>

*If I become an old hag  
Where is the fragrance in me?  
For him there will be one without the home  
And one within.  
Forty six, forty seven, forty eight.*

The song indicates several aspects of a working woman's life – the tedium of her work situation, a typical domestic situation of a patriarchal home in which the man moves freely between his wife and his mistress, as seen in the phrase “one without the home and one within”, and the compulsions under which a woman has to work in order to survive. The longish folk song goes on eventually to take the bucket count beyond one hundred.

## Mullai – the Pastoral Tract and Dairy Farming

A familiar sight in the Tamil countryside – even in my childhood (1950s and early 60s) – was the *morkari* and *neykari*, literally “the buttermilk woman” and “the woman who sells clarified butter” (ghee). These women are itinerant peddlers who generally carry their wares in an earthen vessel on their heads. The predominance of women in the production and sale of dairy products goes back a long way in Tamil culture. The Sangam period poetry of the Mullai (pastoral) *tinai* contains extensive metaphors and images pertaining to women churning buttermilk, milking cows and selling curds and butter. The *Perumpanatruppadai*,<sup>45</sup> ascribed to roughly the fourth century CE, gives a detailed account of a shepherdess's day of work. In a somewhat clumsy simile it compares her rhythmic churning of the curds to a tiger's roar. The shepherdess in the Tamil country is known by names such as “Aaichchi”, “Kovichchi”, “Idachchi”, etc. Starting her day at dawn, she churns the curds to extract butter. She then sells the buttermilk from door to door in the Kurinji and Marudam regions. With the money she gets, she buys grains and other necessities. Elsewhere in the *Purananuru* it is said that curds were exchanged directly for

43 Tamizhannal 1956, p. 99. The translation of the song is mine. The term used for labourer is *chital* and for overseer *kangani*.

44 Vanamamalai 1964, p. 417. For more such examples from Tamil work songs see Ramaswamy 1994, pp. 23–24.

45 *Perumpanatruppadai*, ed. Swaminathayyar 1931, lines 156–60.

grains with the farmer's wife.<sup>46</sup> Women therefore were key participants in the rural barter economy.

The process of setting curds by curdling the milk is used as a simile in the *Purananuru*: "Like the curd being squirted into a pot of milk from the fingers of a tired shepherdess."<sup>47</sup> The same anthology contains another poem that describes a prosperous housewife in the Pandyan country who exchanged her paddy for the goat meat brought by the shepherdess from Mullai.<sup>48</sup> In the *Perumpanatruppadai*<sup>49</sup> it is said that the Aaichchi is not satisfied with the gold she saves up from her dairy sales. In order to expand her business she uses the "capital" to buy a good milch buffalo, a good cow and a black buffalo. The term employed for capital here is *mudal*. This indicates that some women went beyond simple barter and actually set up dairy businesses.

The image of the shepherdess figures very strongly in the religious literature of the early medieval Bhagavata movement (commencing around the seventh century CE). In the *Tiruppavai* (a lyrical religious composition) of the female saint Andal (seventh century), there occurs repeatedly the portrait of the dusky shepherdess, with her heavy chains and clinking bracelets, churning the curds at dawn.<sup>50</sup> Andal's home was Tirumullaivayil, a pastoral zone specializing in dairy products. The very name Mullai connects it with the pastoral economy, as evident from the Sangam eco-zones analysed above. Over time it may have gained the status of a small town. Today Tirumullaivayil constitutes a suburb of Chennai and is a sacred site. It is noteworthy that Krishna or Mayon, the deity of the pastoral tract called Mullai, became a central cult figure of the Bhagavata movement. The centrality of the "milk maids" who milked the cows, churned buttermilk and sold products such as milk, curds (yogurt) and butter, is bound up with the medieval *bhakti* movements and the devotion of the *gopis* or milkmaids towards Krishna. If one were to look for parallels from other regions, the milkmaids of Brindavan (Mathura) might be comparable.<sup>51</sup>

The persistence of the pastoral zone, with its predominantly dairy-based economy in the medieval period, can therefore be regarded as both a result of historical circumstances of these towns and the flourishing of Krishna *bhakti*, signifying the popularity of the pastoral deity Mayon. However, the nature of pastoral women's share in the overall medieval economy is more difficult to ascertain. European sources for the medieval period suggest that because of the proximity of the pastoral and agricultural tracts, women from poor peasant families often hired themselves out as servants in the dairy sector in the emerging European towns. As the housewife became free from labour in the larger dairy farms, milking, cheese making and butter making became the work of hired women workers. An experienced cook would carry her spoon or ladle in her apron and a dairymaid her

46 *Purananuru*, ed. Swaminathayyar 1935, stanza 33, lines 1–6.

47 *Purananur*, in *ibid.* 276, lines 4–5.

48 *Ibid.*, lines 166–68.

49 *Perumpanatruppadai*, ed. Svaminathayyar 1931, lines 164–65.

50 Andal's *Tiruppavai*, songs 7, 8, 12, etc. I have translated from the Tamil text in *Nachchiyar Tirumozhi and Tiruppavai*, 1985.

51 Mukherji 1982, pp. 325–31.

stool. Daniel Defoe characterized the techniques of these “working women” for attracting attention as “eminently impudent”.<sup>52</sup>

## NEYDAL – WOMEN IN THE COASTAL ECONOMY

Women living in the coastal terrain have traditionally played an active role in salt panning and salt sales. Women engaged in salt production and sales were known as *umanapendir*.<sup>53</sup> The *Perumpanatruppadai*<sup>54</sup> describes how the *umanar* couple extracted the salt, loaded it on carts and sold it in the neighbouring eco-regions. The *umanapendir* also hawked the head-loads of salt from door to door, receiving in exchange paddy and other essentials.<sup>55</sup>

Fisheries constitute another economic sphere in which women traditionally played a major role. In early Tamilaham (which includes the regions of Kerala and Andhra Pradesh) women played a key role in catching and hawking the fish. Paradaiyar women caught and sold fish, and young girls of this community kept watch over the fish as they were dried in the sun.<sup>56</sup> The *Ahananuru*<sup>57</sup> refers to these women as *panimagal*, literally “working women”, who sat on street corners selling fish. This suggests that the more affluent fisherfolk may have hired women to carry out the actual task of hawking the merchandise. There are also references to fisherwomen who exchanged fish for paddy from the Marudam *tinai*. The *Aingurunuru*<sup>58</sup> says that the Valaiyar (another fishing community) women sold *viral* fish (regarded as a delicacy) and in return received year-old white rice (i.e. high-quality rice).

## THE HANDLOOM SECTOR

While in most traditional Indian societies weaving has been a male preserve (the exception being hill regions and tribal belts), spinning has always been exclusively women’s work. Vedic texts however, refer to women weavers as *vayatri*.<sup>59</sup> While the overall number of women weavers vis-à-vis men remains ambiguous, canonical literature such as the *Shatapatha Brahmana*<sup>60</sup> makes it clear that spinning was the exclusive domain of women.

Sangam literature refers to spinners as *parutti pendugal*, literally “the spinning women”. In particular, spinning was the occupation of destitute widows and single women, those categories of women, interestingly, who had to sustain themselves through their own earnings.<sup>61</sup> The *Purananuru*, a Sangam text datable to anywhere between the third century

52 Hufton 1993 on p. 18 cites Daniel Defoe’s *The Behavior of Servants in England*, London 1724, pp. 1–9.

53 *Perumpanatruppadai*, ed. Svaminathayyar 1931, lines 61–65.

54 *Ibid.*, lines 50–60.

55 *Ahananuru*, 390: 8–10; 140; *Kurunthogai*, 269: 5.

56 *Ahananuru*, 9, 20.

57 *Ahananuru*, 126.

58 *Aingurunuru*, ed. Swaminathaiyyar and Sundaranar 1957, 47: 1–3 and stanza 48. See also *Purananuru*, 343: 1.

59 “*Gnas tva krantann apaso tanvata vayatriyo vayan*” says the *Panchavimsha Brahmana*, see Rau 1970, p. 16, n. 13.

60 “*Tat vai etat strinam karma yad urnasutram*” (7.2.11), see Rau 1970, p. 16.

61 In this connection, the English word “spinster” for a single woman provides an interesting parallel since the word originates precisely in the same context, as a woman who had to spin for her survival.

BCE and the third century CE, employs the expression *parutti pendir paruvalemma* for the thread spun by spinsters<sup>62</sup> and says that spinsters spun late into the night with the aid of a lamp.<sup>63</sup> Another text, *Natrinai*, refers to widows/spinsters as *alil pendir*, meaning “women without men”, and notes that they spun fine yarn.<sup>64</sup> A celebrated and more or less contemporaneous text from Northern India, *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, states that the *devadasi*, who was too old to perform any service in the temple, was employed to card cotton for her livelihood. *Devadasi* and old servant-maids were also employed to cut wood and pick cotton, hemp and flax.<sup>65</sup>

The Virasaivite movement in Karnataka (which began in the twelfth century) provides a refreshing perspective on professional women spinners. The movement has two prominent *vachanakaras* from this profession, Kadire Remmavve and Kadire Kayakada Kalavve. Both women have prefixed their names with their profession *kadire*, meaning spinner, quite in keeping with the social philosophy of Virasaivism. A celebrated dictum of the religion is *Kayakave Kailasa*, which in idiomatic English would be “work is worship”. Virasaivism holds as its cardinal principle the necessity to work and be self-reliant. In so saying it challenged the Brahmanical notion of mendicancy and alms-taking as a path to salvation. For the first time the working woman gained her own identity and social space, despite the fact that the movement functioned within a patriarchal framework.

Kadire Remmavve used the imagery connected with her occupation to describe not only her faith but her social situation as well. She says:

*Fast turning spinning wheel  
Listen to the caste and lineage (kula jati)  
of the spinning wheel I turn  
The plank below is Vishnu  
The wooden idol [bobbin winder] Maha Rudra  
The two threads that pass through constitute intellect  
awareness is the spindle  
You turn the wheel by the handle called devotion  
The threads turn and the bobbin is filled.  
I cannot turn the spinning wheel  
because my husband has beaten me  
What can be done, My Lord Gummisvara!*<sup>66</sup>

Kadire Kalavve says that the spindle of spirituality will break if one mixes with *vrataheena* or persons with faith and devotion. The *Charkha Namah* (Spinning Loom Songs), popular among Muslim women in the North Deccan during the medieval period, also belong to

62 *Purammanuru*, ed. Swaminathaiyyar. Madras, 1935, song 61, line 1.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 327.

64 *Natrinai*, ed. Narayanaswami 1952, 353: 1–2.

65 *Arthashastra* of Kautilya II: 23, see Tyagi 1994, p. 105.

66 Ramaswamy 1996, p. 54. Remmavve’s term “wooden idol” clearly indicates a bobbin winder.

this genre. The medieval historian Isami, in his *Futuh-at-us-Salatin*, has a very interesting passage on women and the profession of spinning. Talking about the failure of Razia Sultana, the ruler of Delhi Sultanate, Isami writes “a woman cannot acquit herself well as a ruler, for she is essentially deficient in intellect. It is better for a woman to occupy herself with the *charkha* since the attainment of high position on her part would make her intoxicated.”<sup>67</sup>

Spinning continued to be the exclusive professional preserve of women during the medieval Vijayanagar period. Srinatha in the *Palnattu Viracharitra* (c. fifteenth century) says that in Palnad, while the farmers ploughed the field their wives spun thread. Women spinning thread must have been such a common sight in the region, for Srinatha comments that even if the celestial dancer Ramba were to come to Palnad, she would perforce have to rotate the spinning wheel!<sup>68</sup>

In his pioneering monograph on medieval craft and trade during the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, A. I. Chicherov brings together evidence from diverse regions, especially Bengal, to show that spinning was the profession of upper-caste women, more particularly impoverished Brahmin widows.<sup>69</sup> In the pre-colonial period spinning was by and large a part of the informal sector of the economy. Women did the spinning within their domestic space and then either sold the products directly at local fairs or delivered them to middlemen (agents of Master-Weavers or merchants) who collected the spun yarn from them.

In the handloom sector, the bleaching and washing of cloth has also been predominantly a women’s activity. The washerwomen came from the lowest caste and were called Pulatti. The *Purananuru*<sup>70</sup> says that the Pulatti washed clothes in a particular area called *kalar*, whose mud was a good purifying and whitening agent. Their use of the *kalar* mud for washing earned them the name Kalayar. The texts describe how a washerwoman prepared starch from rice<sup>71</sup> and dipped the clothes in the starchy solution.<sup>72</sup> Finally with her long, tapered fingers she removed the lumpy or excess starch from the clothes.<sup>73</sup> The *Ahananuru* also refers to washing and starching of cloth by the Pulatti.<sup>74</sup> *Natrinai* says that the Pulatti worked far into the night, drying or starching clothes, sometimes both.<sup>75</sup>

With the Pulaya caste, both men and women carried out the washing of clothes. Washerwomen were called Vannati or Pulatti in the Tamil country and Chakali in Andhra. Sangam texts and early medieval texts repeatedly state that apart from bleaching woven cloth, washermen washed the clothes of people and presumably were paid for it.

67 *Futuh-at-us-Salatin* 1976, vol. 2, pp. 253–54. For an overview see Siddiqui in Pawar ed., 1996, pp. 87–101.

68 *Palnattu Viracharitra* of fifteenth-century poet Srinatha in Sastri and Venkataramanayya 1946, vol. 3, p. 52.

69 Chicherov 1971, pp. 52–56.

70 *Purananuru*, 311: 1–2. Also *Ahananuru*, 89, which says that the washermen were called Kalaiyar because of the mud they used for washing.

71 *Natrinai*, 90: 2–4, see Ramaswamy 1989, p. 87.

72 *Kurunthogai*, 330, 1, *ibid.*, p. 87.

73 *Ahananuru*, 34: 11–12 *ibid.*, p. 87.

74 *Ibid.*, *Ahananuru*, 34 and 387.

75 *Natrinai*, 353, see Balambal 1998, p. 39.

The Pulatti are clearly mentioned as women who washed impure clothes<sup>76</sup> (rendered impure by neonatal ceremonies following birth or by death). Her male counterpart, the Pulayan, was usually the one who handled the dead body and the Pulatti cleaned the house of death with cow dung, etc. Thus within a traditional social structure dominated by fear of death pollution, it was logical for the Pulayar to be regarded as an “untouchable” caste (located below and beyond the four *varnas*).

There are a few medieval inscriptional references to these people.<sup>77</sup> It is clear that the washing of clothes was a paid service, but there is no indication of what was the nature and mode of payment. One can only assume that like other menials and professionals of the village community, they were being paid from the grain heap. An isolated piece of evidence is a document from the Mackenzie Collection, which says that, as her wages, a Pulatti was paid three sheep and three rupees collectively by the village community.<sup>78</sup>

A sociological facet to the professional and social status of the Pulatti is provided by the medieval twelfth-century hagiographic text *Periyapurānam*. It refers not only to their drinking habits but says that they frequently went into a state of “possession” and frenzied dance, “jumping about the cattle”.<sup>79</sup> An analysis of “possession” behaviour has shown that it was quite often the means adopted by the disempowered and unprivileged to seek empowerment and social recognition. This logic would certainly hold true in the case of the Pulatti.

## WOMEN IN CRAFTS: POTTERY, BASKETRY, MAT-WEAVING, PITH WORK AND GARLANDS

A major poet of the Sangam period called Venni Kuyattiyar (literally “the potter of the Venni region”) became well known for her poem celebrating the victory of Karikala Chola (c. second century CE) at the battle of Venni, in the Tanjavur district. An inscriptional reference to Kumbari, or the potter’s wife who assisted her husband in smoothing out the clay and baking the pots, is found from the Andhra region.<sup>80</sup>

Basket making and mat weaving have been traditionally associated with women. Both are types of cottage industry and are very poorly paid professions. In the *Kalittogai*, roughly datable to the sixth century CE, it is said that besides washing, it was the work of the Pulatti to make baskets out of *korai* weeds.<sup>81</sup> In inscriptions there is reference to *Medari*, meaning female basket weaver.<sup>82</sup> In the Karnataka and Andhra regions the basket weavers belonged to the Medara caste. There is a reference to women basket weavers, whose work is known

76 *Ahamnanuru*, 387: 6–7 and *Purananuru*, 368: 15–16, see Hanumanthan 1979, pp. 131–32.

77 *South Indian Inscriptions* (henceforth *S.I.I.*), vol. 4, no. 1384.

78 Appadorai 1936, vol. 1, p. 280 cites Colin Mackenzie, “The Village Feast.” *Indian Antiquary* 3, pp. 6–9.

79 *Periyapurānam*, see Sastri 1975, pp. 568–69.

80 *S.I.I.*, vol. 4, no. 677.

81 *Kalittogai*, Nachchinarkiniyar commentary, ed. Anantharaman 1925, *Marutam*, 13–14 and also verse 117.

82 *Journal of the Andhra Historical Research Society* 4:3–4, p. 205, see Hemlatha 1991, p. 41.

as *kantakara vritti*, in the Vallabharaya's *Kreedabhiramamu*<sup>83</sup> (c. fifteenth century). The same text also states that many of these Medara women were so poor that out of economic compulsion they took to prostitution. Basketry is the auxiliary craft of the Parava (fisherwomen) of Kerala.

In the south, pith work (called *netti*) was also done by women, and involved a plant known as sholapith that has spongy cellular tissues in its soft, flexible stems and branches. The Sangam texts refer to the many crafted items made out of *netti*, including hair decorations and garlands. The *Silappadikaram* refers to the *netti* work done in Pumpuhar and the sale of *netti* products in the markets of Pumpuhar.<sup>84</sup> With *netti* were made flowers, toys, and hair decorations, especially marriage coronets. Although the text does not specifically state that *netti* workers were women, one can logically presume so since women are still engaged in *netti* work in South India. In Karnataka among the Gudagara caste, the men carve wooden figures while the women engaged in pith/*netti* work.<sup>85</sup> Whether it is basketry, mat weaving or *netti* working, evidence indicates that while production was dominated by women, their labour was informal and extremely underpaid, and sometimes made all the worse by sexual exploitation.

Making garlands and selling flowers were (and continue to be) predominantly women's occupations. The *Ahananuru* says that Vettuva (feminine of Vedar, hill tribe) girls gathered the flowers in bamboo pipes and went to the villages to sell them.<sup>86</sup> Devaradiyar usually undertook the task of garland making in the temples. An eleventh-century record from the Abhiramesvara temple in Tiruvamattur (in the South Arcot district) refers to women being employed to pick flowers and make garlands.<sup>87</sup> The same record says that while male workers employed by the temple for drawing water and irrigating the fields were paid at the rate of 8 *nalis* of rice per day, women workers were given exactly half that, i.e. 4 *nalis* of rice. The *Kreedabhiramamu* also refers to women engaged in the profession of garland making and flower selling.<sup>88</sup>

## “DANCING GIRLS” AS WORKING WOMEN: FROM DEVARADIYAR TO TEVADIYA

The changing phases of the Devaradiyar and the nature of the work associated with the community of temple women are crucial to the theme of women and work. In Sangam literature, dancing girls are called Parataiyar and Madhavi and are cast as rivals to the protagonist of the “chaste” wife Kannagi. In the epics *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* (dated roughly between the second and fourth century CE) there appears a well-known dancing girl of Kaveripumpattinam.

83 *Kreedabhiramamu* of Vallabharaya, ed. Sastry 1952, verse 67. The first English translation of *Kreedabhiramamu* was by Rao and Shulman in 2002.

84 *Silappadikaram*, 4: 45–51 and 5: 28–34.

85 Chattopadhyay 1985, p. 111.

86 *Ahananuru*, ed. with commentary by Nattar and Pillai 1943, song 231.

87 *Annual Report of Epigraphy* (henceforth *A.R.E.*) 1922, no. 18 dated CE 1030.

88 *Kreedabhiramamu*, 174.

It is important to point out that nowhere in early medieval inscriptional records does the term *devadasi* actually figure. It is only in the nineteenth century that this term, which dominates our understanding of women temple workers, begins to be encountered. In the inscriptions and early texts, they are known by various terms such as *devaradiyar*, *soole*, *sani*, *paatra* and sometimes *ganika* or *dasika*. Historically, temple women seem to have been divided into three categories: *devaradiyar*, *padiyilar* and *ishtabhattaliyar*. There is clear inscriptional and literary evidence that some *devaradiyar* did get married.<sup>89</sup> The *Dashakumara Charita* of Dandin refers to this practice.<sup>90</sup> There is even reference to a *devaradiyar* having married a king of the Velanadu family whose territoriality comes under the Eastern Chalukyas of Vengi.<sup>91</sup> The category of women called *padiyilar* remained single and their name literally means “those who are without husbands”.

Inscriptions suggest that there was a hierarchy of the *devaradiyar* as well as the nature of the temple work assigned to them, ranging from slaves and prostitutes, at one end of the spectrum, to temple attendants/servants and to affluent, land-owning *devaradiyar* at the other. Recorded in inscriptions are several instances of the sale of dancing girls to the temple, indicating that their status must have been that of virtual slaves. A record dated CE 1119 states that an army captain called Alagiya Pallavarayar gave the girls of his family to the Tiruvallan temple after branding them on their foreheads with a trident.<sup>92</sup> A similar sale of four women as *devaradiyar* to the Tiruvalangadu temple for a sum of 700 *kasu* is reported in an inscription date 1175.<sup>93</sup> Another record from Tiruvorriyur refers to a gift to the Tiruvorriyur temple of five women and their descendants as *devaradiyar*, who were employed by the temple authorities in the work of husking paddy.<sup>94</sup> These records indicate that the *devaradiyar* were drawn from divergent castes ranging from Kaikkolar to Isai-Vellalar.

Inscriptional evidence is, however, equally clear on the point that while slaves may have constituted one rung of female temple servants, another rung consisted of independent women professionals. Even among the professional female temple servants, the work structure was not monolithic but hierarchical. The inscriptional record dated 1265 from Tiruvorriyu<sup>95</sup> (Chingleput district) of the period of Rajanarayana Sambuvaraya refers to a strike by the *devaradiyar*, *padiyilar* and *ishtabhattaliyar* as a result of the confusion over the allocation of duties and their ritual hierarchy. A committee constituting of Nattar, Maheshvaras, Sthanathar, Virachola Anukkar and Kaikkolar, headed by a Mudaliyar of Bhiksha Matam of Chidambaram, enquired into the charge, and ultimately allocated the functions of the *devaradiyar* and regulated their status. The arbitration was necessitated by the fact that the *padiyilar* were dying of poverty and had become greatly reduced in number. The committee appointed the *ishtabhattaliyar* to assist the *padiyilar*. It appears

89 *S.I.I.*, vol. 5, no. 1102.

90 *Dashakumara Charita*, pp. 74–75, 86, 125, 150, 163, 167, etc., see Gupta 1972, p. 222.

91 Venkataramanayya 1950, p. 287.

92 *A.R.E.*, 230 of 1921–1922, part 2, para. 19.

93 *A.R.E.*, 80 of 1913.

94 *A.R.E.*, 122 of 1912.

95 *A.R.E.*, 196 of *A.R.E.* 1912–1913, pp. 128ff. para. 51 of part 2.



that the *devaradiyar* may have been at the top of this hierarchy, because they were specifically exempted from such menial chores as *taligai vilakku* (rice cleaning) and *tiruvillakku tirumelugu* (cleaning the lamps with cow dung). The *devaradiyar* were to carry the flower plates *pushpataligai* and *tirunirkappu* (?) while the *ishtabhattaliyar*, the lowest in the hierarchy, made the *varikkolam* that decorated the temple floor with rice flour and cleaning vessels. Holding the mirror before the deity, fanning the deity with the flywhisk<sup>96</sup> and holding the *Sripadam*<sup>97</sup> (literally the auspicious feet of the Lord represented in gold) were tasks performed by the “superior” dancing girls. The dispute continued, necessitating another arbitration committee under the aegis of Vittappar of Anegondi, an official of Kampana Udaiyar, and yet another committee three years later under Tunaiyirunda Nambi Kongarayar. The task of dancing and singing in the temples was assigned to the dancing girls, with the *ishtabhattaliyar* dancing before the god and the *devaradiyar* before the goddess. The same Tiruvorriyur inscription refers to *devaradiyar* being assigned the task of singing Tiruppadiyam in *Agama marga* (style to wake up the deity).<sup>98</sup>

Considering the wide variety of economic and social activities engaged in by these “temple-women”, it becomes important to locate them as active agents in the temple economy, whether in a subordinate or controlling capacity.<sup>99</sup> Historical evidence makes it amply clear that not all temple women were slaves or of lowly status. Many of them enjoyed a high status, property and a respectable social position. Inscriptions from the Chola-Pandya period refer to the land holdings of *devaradiyar*. The eleventh-century Rajaraja inscription<sup>100</sup> states that the *devaradiyar* were invited to serve the *Thanjavur periya koyil* and were given a house site and land near the temple. In 1337 the task of conducting the celebration of an important festival at the temple of Alamelumagamma in Tiruchchanur (Tirupati) was jointly given to the *devaradiyar* and the Kaikkolar.<sup>101</sup> The *devaradiyar* also enjoyed the rare privilege of an exclusive audience with the king.<sup>102</sup> Thus these women were powerful, financially independent and apparently socially respected.<sup>103</sup> There are records that attest to them as landowners as well as generous donors of land to the temples.<sup>104</sup>

The position of dancing girls in the context of the economic domain has to be determined in terms of the data, however sparse, regarding the structure of work and wages.

96 *S.I.I.*, vol. 11, no. 1035 from Simhachalam (in modern Waltair in Andhra Pradesh).

97 *A.R.E.*, nos. 373 and 380 of 1919 published in Subramanian 1957 as nos. 358 and 369.

98 The Agamas are theoretical treatises as well as practical manuals on modes of ritual temple worship.

99 Interesting perspectives on temple *devaradiyar* in the Chola period are provided in Orr 2000. Apart from discussing “Temple Women as Servants of the Lord”, she also engages with “Temple Women as Temple Patrons” and “property and piety”. Orr has looked at the material assets, especially landed properties of the *devadasi*. Her work can therefore be seen as breaking away from traditional historiographies that tend to conflate the categories of temple women, ritual dancers, temple servants and “sacred” prostitution.

100 *S.I.I.*, vol. 2, part 2, no. 66.

101 *Tirumalai-Tirupati Devasthanam Inscriptions* (henceforth *T.T.D.I.*), vol. 1, no. 108.

102 *A.R.E.*, 229 of 1919. The inscription dating to the period of king Deva Raya II of the Vijayanagar empire states that the *devaradiyar* alone, among women, enjoyed the privilege of a direct audience with the king.

103 This is the thrust of the article by Sen 1993, pp. 240–77.

104 For example *S.I.I.*, vol. 5, nos. 1026, 1027, 1102, etc.

An inscription from the Tiruvorriyur temple<sup>105</sup> clarifies that the women employed as garland makers were paid 10 *nalis* of rice each per day together with 1½ *kalanju* of *pon* per annum for buying clothes. One of the earliest inscriptions referring to the grant of house sites and paddy shares to the *devaradiyar* is the tenth-century record of Rajaraja I, from Brahadisvara temple.<sup>106</sup> An undated inscription from Malkapuram states that Kasisvara Siva Ayyamgaru (village community) made a gift of one *khandika* and ten *tumus* of land to each of the eleven *sanis*.<sup>107</sup> The Srikurmam inscription dated CE 1250 provides us with valuable information regarding the wages paid to the *sanis* stating “to each of the thirty *sanis*, 42 *puttis* of paddy per year, two *tambulams* every day and three *appanas* per month”.<sup>108</sup> The Chebrolu inscription of Jayappa, the general of Kakatiya Ganapati dated CE 1235, records the construction of double-storied houses for the sixteen best *ganikas* of the temple of Chodisvara at Tamrapura.<sup>109</sup>

A very interesting inscription from Mangalore dated CE 1204 states that if the dancing girls did not turn up to perform their specified duties in the temple they were to be fined 5½ coins as penalty.<sup>110</sup> Of the dancing girls that came under the purview of the Sanula Samayamu (literally, the collective organization of *sanis*), it was said that any ethical violation of the professional/social code could result in the expulsion of the dancing girl.<sup>111</sup> Medieval inscriptions that refer to the Soolevala<sup>112</sup> suggest that this must have been an official specifically appointed to supervise the duties of the dancing girls.<sup>113</sup>

Prostitution was and continues to be a female preserve. Since this is the only profession that has been recognized as a woman’s profession, there is a plethora of literature on the topic. The fee collected by prostitutes for their services was called *roya*. The non-payment of fees to the prostitute was punishable by law, as was the charging of excess money from the customers by the prostitute. Reference to special courts called Jara Dharmasasanamu, which dealt with issues of justice<sup>114</sup> concerning prostitutes, comes from both inscriptions<sup>115</sup> and literature.<sup>116</sup> The Shiva Sharanes within the Virasaiva movement, which originated in Karnataka in the twelfth century but spread over much of Andhra as well, includes a few professional prostitutes such as Gangamma, Soola Sankavve and

105 *A.R.E.*, 146 of 1912. The 1912–1913 volume of the *A.R.E.* series is particularly rich in its information on the *devaradiyar* of the Tiruvorriyur temple.

106 *S.I.I.*, vol. 2, pt. 2, no. 66.

107 *S.I.I.*, vol. 10, no. 396, see Reddy 1991, p. 74.

108 *S.I.I.*, vol. 5, no. 1188, see Reddy 1991, pp. 74–75.

109 *Epigraphica Indica*, vol. 6, pp. 38–39, text lines 152 to 155 in Reddy 1991, p. 75.

110 *S.I.I.*, vol. 7, no. 185 Gururajachar 1974, p. 246.

111 *S.I.I.*, vol. 6, no. 1202.

112 *S.I.I.*, vol. 9, i. 80 (introduction) and *Hyderabad Archaeological Series (HAS)* 18, p. 35. See P. B. Desai’s introduction in Gururajachar 1974, pp. 246–47.

113 The office is similar to the *Ganikadyaksha*, meaning “Head of the Courtesans”, referred to in Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* (Sanskrit text dated between third century BCE and second century CE), ed. Kangle 1965, lines 2.27.1.

114 A brief but interesting article on this theme is by Padma in Satyanarayana, and Reddy 2005, pp. 12–15.

115 *Hyderabad Archaeological Series*, vol. 19, Warangal 3, Koravi inscription, pp. 135–38, see Padma, *ibid.* p. 14.

116 *Kreedhabiramamu* of Vinukonda Vallabharaya 1960, verses 265, 272, see Padma, *ibid.* p. 14.

Virasangavve.<sup>117</sup> One of them called Soola Sankavve in her *vachana* speaks of professional ethics:

*In my harlot's trade,  
having taken one man's money  
I daren't accept a second man's, Sir.  
And if I do,  
they will stand me naked and  
kill me, Sir.  
And if I cohabit  
with the polluted,  
my hands, nose, ears  
they'll cut off  
with a red hot knife, Sir.  
Ah, never, no  
knowing you, I will not.  
My word on it  
Libertine siva!<sup>118</sup>*

Perhaps the only professional women's guild consisted of the temple women, and the inscriptions characterize them as *Sani Munnuru*.<sup>119</sup> The guild seems to have enjoyed some power, because a thirteenth-century record (dated 1292) from Peddakallepalle in Krishna district<sup>120</sup> even indicates that the *Sani Munnuru*, along with the *Sthanapatis* (also called *Sthanathar*, i.e. temple trustees) were part of the temple management. In another record the collective organization of the Sani is referred to as *Nibandhakaralu* in the context of temple managers/trustees.<sup>121</sup> Two records from the Narasimha temple at Simhachalam dated 1427 and 1447 respectively refer to them as *Sanula Sampradayam* literally "hereditary/traditional temple dancers". The ubiquitous presence of *devaradiyar* as "professionals" functioning in the public domain makes the trope of these so-called "dancing girls" vital to an understanding of the nature of women and work within and beyond domestic spaces.

## MAIDS AND MENIALS

The references to low-caste women employed as domestic workers are fewer in the Sangam period essentially because, while the texts mention the poorer classes and low castes as *kadaiyar* and *kadaiyiar*, there is no clear evidence that they worked as domestic labour. Rather, it must be inferred from Sangam texts like *Mullai pattu*, which refer to the

117 I have briefly discussed this aspect under the section on 'Social Philosophy' in my 1996 book, pp. 52–55.

118 Translated by Susan Daniel, in Tharu 1991, pp. 81–82.

119 *S.I.L.*, vol. 5, no. 161.

120 *S.I.L.*, vol. 6, no. 84.

121 *S.I.L.*, vol. 10, no. 10.

employment of girls for lighting of huge lamps and as handmaidens in war-camps.<sup>122</sup> Maids in the capacity of female attendants or companions do figure in a number of Sangam texts. In the *Ahananuru*, the maid chastises a philanderer for trifling with the affection of her mistress and then abandoning her “like an evil man who falls out with a friend who has lost his wealth”.<sup>123</sup> For Northern India, however, there is a plethora of evidence of servant-maids, especially from Buddhist sources.<sup>124</sup> The women employed as servants or menials were both free and unfree (i.e. slaves). According to the canonical text *Narada Smriti*, “impure work” such as scavenging, cleaning the house of death or the giving of “massage” was to be performed by slaves, while “free” servants were exempt from such socially “demeaning” tasks.<sup>125</sup> Finley describes domestic servitude as “Between Slavery and Freedom”.<sup>126</sup> This would also be an accurate description of the *karmakaris* in the Indian context.

The twelfth-century Sanskrit text *Manasollasa*,<sup>127</sup> written in north Peninsular India by the Chalukyan king Somesvara, recommends the employment of women for such menial tasks as drawing water, serving food (women cooks would be of a superior strata), sweeping and swabbing of the premises, washing feet, massaging, hair dressing, etc. In Tamil inscriptions these maids are referred to as *atiyar*, *totti* (untouchable caste?) or *panimakkal*. In Sanskrit the commonly used terms are *paricharika* or *dasi*. According to the medieval text *Basava Puranamu*, carrying water and taking the cattle to graze also seems to have constituted the maid’s duties.<sup>128</sup> Women also performed construction labour. One Chola inscription from Tiruvamattur (in South Arcot district) says that at a site where there were both male and female labourers, the women were to be paid half of what the men got.<sup>129</sup> The record specifies the work as lifting water from ponds and canals etc., irrigating the gardens and fields and also gathering flowers and making garlands. For all such labour the male workers were to be paid 8 *nazhis* of rice per day, while the women workers were to be paid only 4 *nazhis*. Another inscription similarly states that among daily-wage workers, women were to be paid half of the wages given to men.<sup>130</sup> Servants, including those employed to sing in the temples, were granted lands as service tenures.<sup>131</sup> Female musicians would of course be in a slightly higher category of servants than the unskilled maids. However, a record dated CE 1235 states that even female attendants were given

122 *Mullaipattu*, 45–49, Vidyanandan 1954, p. 265.

123 In the *Ahananuru*, both “Aintinai Elupatu” and “Aintinai Aimpathu” have a number of references to female attendants/companions. See Krishnan 2000, pp. 239–45.

124 Important investigations on the nature of the work undertaken by the *dasīs*, *karmakaris* and other categories of women workers have been made by Uma Chakravarti in her many writings on women. See especially her essay “Of Dasas and Karmakaras” in her 2006 book, pp. 70–100.

125 *Narada Smriti*, ch. 5: 23–42; see Hanumanthan 1979, p. 55.

126 Finley 1964, pp. 233–49.

127 *Manasollasa* of Somesvara III, ed. Shrigondekar, Baroda 1939, verses 1817–1818.

128 Early medieval references to this are found in *Tattvasaram* and the *Basava Puranamu*, cited in Kamat 1980, p. 63.

129 *A.R.E.*, 18 of 1922.

130 *A.R.E.*, 223 of 1917.

131 *S.I.I.*, vol. 2, no. 66.

house sites.<sup>132</sup> A thirteenth-century Pandyan inscription refers to a curious case involving a murder where the Pandyan state also confiscated the lands of the male and female servants of the murderer.<sup>133</sup> A remarkable record belonging to the fourteenth regnal year of Rajadhiraja II from Achchalpuram<sup>134</sup> defines the lowly status occupied by workers and servants in medieval society. The record says that workers should not use titles such as *Vel* or *Arasu*, should not beat the drums on sad or happy occasions and, further, that even wealthier servants cannot own slaves. The medieval text *Yasatilaka* refers to the employment of elderly and experienced women as supervisors over the servant-maids of the royal household.<sup>135</sup>

Within the Bhakti tradition there is an interesting reversal of this lowly status accorded to servants, both men and women, in secular life. Basavanna, the twelfth-century saint who spearheaded the Virasaivite movement, says in one of his *vachanas* that “it is far better to be a *totti* (maid) in a devotee’s house than a queen in the palace.”<sup>136</sup>

## WET NURSES, FOSTER MOTHERS AND MIDWIVES

Throughout the corpus of Sangam literature, wet nurses (termed *chevili thai*) are important protagonists. Though it is logical to presume that only indigent women took to this profession, the nurse seems to have enjoyed the respect as well as affection of the family she served. The *Ahananuru*<sup>137</sup> refers to women adopting the profession of wet nurse. The *Perumpanatruppadai*<sup>138</sup> lists the duties of the nurse as including feeding and amusing the child, soothing the child to sleep, etc. A beautiful poem from the *Natrinai*<sup>139</sup> expresses a mother’s reminiscence about her daughter who had just got married:

*Is this my child behind whom the wet nurse used to run, with a golden cup of rice mixed  
with honey and milk in her hands, alternately coaxing and threatening the child?*

In the *Kurinjpattu*,<sup>140</sup> the daughter of the house first confides her love affair to her wet nurse or foster mother, who then convinces the mother and the marriage takes place. Wet nurses also wielded some power in peninsular politics. Devakabbe, the wet nurse of chief Irebedenga, donated seventy *dramma* and land at Choppadandu, which went towards the construction of a water tank.<sup>141</sup> The children of wet nurses also came to occupy administrative positions. An inscription dated CE 1235 records grants made by a royal servant,

132 *Epigraphica Indica*, vol. 6, pp. 38–39, see Appadorai 1990, vol. 1, p. 279.

133 *A.R.E.*, 301, 302 and 303 of 1923 and part 2, para. 77.

134 *A.R.E.*, 538 of 1918, 1919 part 2, pp. 97–98. For an interesting analysis of this inscription see Pandarattar 1974, pp. 572–73.

135 Handiqui, K. K., *Yasatilaka and Indian Culture*, Sholapur, 1949, p. 28, see Kamat 1980, p. 119.

136 *Bhakti Bhandara Basavannavara Vachanagalu*, see Kamat 1980, p. 118.

137 *Ahananuru*, 105.

138 *Perumpanatruppadai*, 247–53.

139 *Natrinai*, 110.

140 *Kurinjpattu*, in *Pathupattu*, 1–26.

141 *Inscriptions of Andhra Pradesh*, Kurnool district, no. 8, see Padma 2001, p. 60.

who was the son of the wet nurse of King Kota Manmaketa.<sup>142</sup> To provide a significant latter-day parallel from Northern India, wet nurses played a crucial role in Mughal history. Much has been written about the involvement in sixteenth-century Mughal politics of Maham Anaga, the wet nurse of emperor Akbar and her natural son Adam Khan.

It appears that the *dhatri* referred to by medieval inscriptions and texts indicate the traditional midwife, called *dai*. An inscription refers to women being employed as midwives in the *prasutishala*, which can be translated roughly as “maternity home”.<sup>143</sup> The *dhatri* or *dai* is referred to in the Vijayanagar period, for instance, in the text *Vaddaradhana* of Sivakoti Acharya<sup>144</sup> as well as in the *Adipurana* of Pampa.<sup>145</sup> The role of the *dai* must have been ubiquitous at all births in traditional societies but, because this is a process that involves extreme privacy and secrecy, historical evidence is extremely sparse.

## OIL EXTRACTION, TODDY MAKING AND THE CULINARY PROFESSION

The history of early Peninsular India suggests strongly that certain types of work were considered an extension of “the domestic” and therefore classified as women’s professions. This included the cooking and hawking of sweetmeats, the extraction and sale of oil, the preparation and sale of liquor made at home from old rice or fruits, and the making and hawking of pickles and *pappad*. The extraction and sale of toddy also involved labour by women. This equation changed in the later medieval period, when profitability increased in tandem with greater capital input and improved technology. As a result of these developments, the traditional domains of female enterprise were gradually taken over by men.

### Oil Extraction

In the Sangam period the extraction and sale of fish oil seems to have been done by fisherwomen called Valachchi. The *Porunaraturpada*<sup>146</sup> states that fish oil and toddy were exchanged for honey and edible roots. The *Kreedabhiramamu* notes that Teliki women extracted and sold champangi *nune*, i.e. oil from the Champangi flower.<sup>147</sup> References to Telika or women oil mongers also appear in medieval inscriptions.<sup>148</sup> The *Keyurabahucharitamu* of Manchanna describes a Vaishya girl bartering oil for rice in a small shop.<sup>149</sup> Over the course of the colonial period, traditional techniques of oil

<sup>142</sup> A.R.E., 484 of 1913.

<sup>143</sup> S.I.I., vol. 5, no. 395.

<sup>144</sup> *Vaddaradhana* of Sivakoti Acharya, vol. 2, p. 34, see Kamat 1980, p. 119.

<sup>145</sup> *Adipurana* of Pampa, verse 21, see Kamath 1980, p. 119.

<sup>146</sup> Ramaswamy 1999, pp. 150–71.

<sup>147</sup> *Kreedabhiramamu* of Vallabharaya verse 103, see Rao and Shulman 2002, p. 48. I must add however, that the description is of a purely sensuous, even voyeuristic nature, and adds nothing materially to the theme of women and work.

<sup>148</sup> S.I.I., vol. 5, nos. 1051 and 1076.

<sup>149</sup> *Keyurabahucharitamu* of Manchanna, second canto, verses 11–15, see Padma 2001, p. 61.

extraction by women gradually disappeared. The building of oil distilleries signified the movement of this work away from women's work spaces altogether into the larger domain of mechanized oil extraction, dominated by male labour.

## Liquor Distillation

Sangam texts are replete with references to women preparing liquor from fermented rice and fruits. The coastal Valaiyar women, from the Neydal region, are said to have processed and sold toddy made from Palmyra juice or rice. In the Marudam region women were associated specifically with the production of rice toddy, which was called *toppi*. The *Perumpanatruppadai*<sup>150</sup> clearly states that women enjoyed drinking the *kallu* or *toppi*, which they prepared at home. The text also explains the process in detail. First, a kind of rice starch was prepared that was allowed to ferment for a day or two. After impurities were drained from this liquor it was called *nerumpili*.<sup>151</sup> Mild toddy prepared from the palm fruit was called *pennai*, while liquor prepared from honey was called *tekkal-tenal*. Women also hawked the liquor that they had prepared. The *Ahananuru*<sup>152</sup> says that the Ariyal girls sold toddy, which they carried on their heads in pots. Like oil, the toddy was also exchanged for paddy or rice.<sup>153</sup> Since women prepared all varieties of liquor their consumption of alcohol is unsurprising.<sup>154</sup> The *Pattinappalai* says that the Paratavar women (fisherfolk) of the Neydal first offered the liquor to the gods and then consumed it.<sup>155</sup>

The tenth-century medieval text *Takkayakkapparani*<sup>156</sup> relates that women consumed strong rice liquor called *neruvu*. As cited earlier, the thirteenth-century hagiographical work *Periyapuranam*<sup>157</sup> refers to *Pulatti* women dancing and jumping around in an inebriated state. Even in the medieval period, liquor distilling was apparently still considered an extension of a woman's domestic chores, although liquor was also made for the local market and sold by women.

As liquor distilleries separated from the rural sector and became professionally more profitable, they were almost entirely taken over by men. This process was a gradual one, commencing from the late medieval and moving into the early colonial times. This phenomenon resonates with one described in Judith Bennett's book on "Ale-Wives" and breweries in medieval England: over the course of the seventeenth century, the trade passed into male hands as it came to be dominated by better technology, more capital and greater profitability.<sup>158</sup>

150 *Perumpanatruppadai*, line 142.

151 *Ibid.*, lines 274–81.

152 *Ahananuru*, 157.

153 Porunaratruppadai, see *Pathupattu*, Swaminathayyar 1937, lines 214–15.

154 *Pattinappalai* in *Pathupattu*, line 108.

155 *Ibid.*, lines 80–85.

156 *Takkayakkapparani*, see Rajamanikkanar 1970, p. 507.

157 *Periyapuranam*, Sastri 1975, pp. 568–69.

158 Bennett 1996.

## Women Cooks as Professionals

In the patriarchal register the kitchen has always constituted woman's space, and cooking is seen as a woman's primary occupation, paid or otherwise. This image is confirmed by the way in which the *Tolkappiyam* includes it among "wifely" duties; references in the *Maduraikanchi*<sup>159</sup> and *Silappadikaram*<sup>160</sup> to the *appakkari* (the *aappam* resembling pancakes) reveal the perception of cooking as a woman's profession. There are references during the medieval period to the appointment of female cooks. An inscription from Talagunda in Karnataka dated CE 1158 states that three female cooks were appointed as cooks in an *agraharam*, and were paid money as well as given clothes.<sup>161</sup> These might only have been destitute Brahmin widows, since no one in an *agraharam* (a Brahmin settlement) would have eaten food cooked by a non-Brahmin. A late-Chola inscription from Tiruvorriyur (Chingleput district) refers to the employment of four cooks to work in the temple kitchen.<sup>162</sup> Medieval inscriptions from Tirupati Devasthanam provide evidence of female cooks.<sup>163</sup> The *Kreedabhiramamu* refers to women who maintained *Pootakulla illu* or small inns where the usual charge was one *ruka* per meal.<sup>164</sup> This reference clearly states that these cooks/inn owners were destitute Brahmin women. Elsewhere the same text also refers to the *Tammadi Sani Mandiramamu*,<sup>165</sup> which may have been rest houses run by the *devaradiyar*. A Kannada text refers to an old woman *Pitavve* who sold *dosa* (similar to pancakes) while her neighbour *Ammavve* sold cow dung cakes.<sup>166</sup> Medieval Persian sources also refer to inns run by women. *Tazkiratul Muluk* of Rafiuddin Shirazi (written between 1608 and 1612) describes the women of the *Bhatiyara* caste as maintaining themselves by keeping inns.<sup>167</sup>

## PROFESSIONAL WOMEN MOURNERS: UNIQUE TO THE INDIAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE

One very important dimension of women's work in the Indian context that has now captured the attention not only of feminist historians but also feminist film makers is the occupation of the professional mourner, something which seems to have been a women's preserve. In India, even in early historical times, professional mourners have almost always been women. In fact a thirteenth-century inscription from Pudukottai state records that when death occurred in any household, the *Valaichchi* women (low caste/untouchables)

159 *Maduraikanchi*, 405–06.

160 *Silappadikaram*, 13: 122–23.

161 *Epigraphica Carnatica*: vol. 7, sk. 185.

162 *A.R.E.*, 128 of 1912–1913, p. 103, see Raman 1959, p. 170.

163 *T.T.D.I.*, ed. Sastri and Viraraghavacharya 1931–1938, vol. 2, no. 135 dated CE 1496.

164 *Kreedabhiramamu* 2002, lines 158–60, 161–66. A Telugu *ruka* is more or less the same as the Tamil *panam*, roughly 0.15% or 0.16% of the seventeenth-century rupee. Another reference to "women cooks" is in line 189 of the same text.

165 *Ibid.*, verse 273.

166 *Vachanadharmasara*: 223, see Kamat 1980, p. 118.

167 Divya Narayanan cites many such instances in her unpublished M.Phil. dissertation 2006.



put a cloth over their heads and mourned the dead with loud wails.<sup>168</sup> The singing of these lamentation songs constituted a special repertoire since, for example, songs intended for young wives dying in child birth would be very different from the songs upon the death of the master of the household, or from the almost celebratory tone of the dirges sung at the death of elderly persons. Cleaning of the death-polluted house with cow dung the next day was also their job. They were paid for both. Professional mourning as women's work has no parallel in Western societies, to the best of my knowledge, and has therefore escaped the critical gaze of Western feminist scholars.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In recent years critiques of everyday life, a key concept within post-colonial discourse, has become women's work and the process of houswifization. This encompasses not only feminist writings on the theme of women's work space but also sociological writings seeking to theorize "Everyday Life". In *Critiques of Everyday Life*,<sup>169</sup> Michael E. Gardiner has gathered together some of the perspectives on everyday life from sociologists Mikhail Bakhtin to the feminist Dorothy E. Smith. Smith contends that mainstream institutionalized forms of sociology (this would be true of most disciplines) present us with versions of the social world that are systematically exclusionary and distorting.<sup>170</sup> She uses the term "malestreaming" for this insidious process of epistemological conditioning. These "malestream" accounts of everyday life effectively rob women of any real agency of understanding and thereby of transforming their world. Smith stresses the immediacy of developing a woman-centred ontology that respects the integrity of every life, and hence the "lived" character of female existence and experience. The challenge lies in steering clear of all abstracted textual forms that feed directly into the requirements of either capitalism or bureaucratic power and control. Such efforts in the context of Indian history must perforce remain very tentative. A panoramic survey of women and work in Peninsular Indian history up to the beginnings of colonialism should be seen as initial steps towards a much more ambitious feminist enterprise. The primary endeavour has been to salvage available data on women's work both paid and unpaid, both visible and less visible, in order to highlight South Indian women's contribution to the work domain and indicate directions of movement and change in women's work/labour history.

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<sup>168</sup> *Inscriptions of the Pudukottai State*, no. 601.

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